

DETECTING FICTION

by

T. Tim Thurman

A. B., Duke University, 1964

Ed. M., Boston University, 1970

M. S., University of Kansas, 1994

Ph. D., United States International University, 1974

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Abstract

This thesis is an essayistic exploration of detective fiction, looking into why I like certain writers (or not) and trying to detect whether there is more artistic merit in their writing than simply proficient plotting and energetic action. The first essay is a general inquiry, looking at various authors and why I either like or dislike them; the second considers three classical noir-type mystery writers (Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Ross Macdonald); and the third examines a characteristic that many hard-boiled detectives display, namely, that each has been damaged in some way, either socially or psychologically. The thrust of these essays is not simply to display my taste but to discern as well whether and what kinds of literary merit is to be found in the detective writers I consider.

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Prologue

In the first house my parents owned, there was a bookshelf, built into the wall, above the sofa. I used to peruse the titles there and marvel at the blue leather bindings with their gold inscriptions. It was undoubtedly faux leather and certainly not actual gold leaf, but they left the intended impression, at least on my impressionable mind. My mother always wanted to appear to be a person of culture—as a way of easing memories of depression-era poverty—and while neither of us actually read any of those books, at least I took from their presence the idea that I should *want* to read them and others like them.

My experience in high school and college reinforced the notion that there were “great books” that belonged to a canon of literary merit and that I should read as many of them as I could in my lifetime. My study of assigned literary texts strengthened that opinion, because, in fact, I really did enjoy such reading: *Lorna Doone*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, *Madame Bovary*, *The Red and the Black*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *Franny and Zooey*, *The Sun Also Rises*, to name but a few.

The irony is that I actually behave more like my mother than I would like to admit: I do *like* the classics, but I tend to read more in popular literature. After college, I frequented the best-seller list, gradually moving toward thrillers and spy novels. Eventually, I came to detective fiction, mostly the hard-boiled variety.

I have at times wondered why I prefer some authors over others. I will learn of certain authors, sample their work, and then either read avidly through many or most, sometimes even all, of their novels or disregard them entirely, ignoring any

other titles of theirs. Why do I like some but not others? Even when I was reading popular novels, my pleasure from and evaluation of a book seemed to hinge on some notion of literary merit. I may have read Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls* in response to its popularity, but I certainly recognized it for the trash it was (and didn't really care for it). Even enjoying the plots of political potboilers like Allen Drury's *Advise and Consent* didn't make me rank them with other popular novels like John Barth's *Giles Goat-Boy* or John Irving's *The World According to Garp*. *Advise and Consent* was fun to read, but *Garp* was "literature" (and no less fun).

If I have discriminated according to some unstated literary criteria in popular novels, perhaps I do the same in detective fiction. In conversation and discussion, I have heard myself say many times that I favored certain writers because of their "writing." Accurate but too broad and imprecise. What did I mean by the term? I decided to look more closely at the detective writers I have read to see if I could narrow the definition of what I meant by "good writing," and the essay seemed the perfect vehicle for such a venture.

This thesis, then, is an essayistic exploration of detective fiction, looking into why I like certain writers (or not) and trying to detect whether there is more artistic merit in their writing than simply proficient plotting and energetic action. The first essay is a general inquiry; the second considers a few of the classical noir-type mystery writers, whom I had not previously read; and the third examines a characteristic that many hard-boiled detectives display, namely, that each has been damaged in some way, either psychologically or socially.

Too Many Words

The esplanade was shady under the spreading oaks, and the wind blew pieces of newspaper through the intersection. The streetcar tracks were burnished the color of copper, and they trembled slightly from the rumbling weight of the car that was still far down the esplanade. The wind was dry, full of dust, the burnt-out end of a long, hot afternoon, and I could smell the acrid scorch in the air that the street cars made when they popped across an electric circuit. Overhead, clouds that had the dull sheen of steam floated in from the Gulf, where the sun was already sinking into a purple thunderhead.

—James Lee Burke, *The Neon Rain*

I once asked the manager of the used bookstore that I then frequented about James Lee Burke. Did she read him? Did she like him? “No, too many words,” she replied. *Too many words?! This isn’t Tolstoi or Cervantes, Melville or Dostoyevsky.* His work may be about crime and about punishment, but it’s not *Crime and Punishment*. What was she talking about, too many words? I think she was probably referring to passages that do not contribute directly to the action or the plot itself, like the passage I have used for the epigraph above. For her, no doubt, detective fiction means mystery and suspense, revelation and resolution; or action, action, action; or perhaps a combination of these. She doesn’t want to be bothered (read: slowed down) by paragraphs or even sentences devoted to setting, mood, tone, characterization, or the moral questions of behavior implied in any crime and its punishment. And Burke’s detective novels have all these elements . . . in spades, one might say. And it is just these qualities that lift his work above the typical novel of the detective genre and raise it to the realm of literature. The stories may be conventional, the action familiar, but the writing is anything but boilerplate designed to hold together generic plots. This is no hack writer pouring out pages of insipid

prose for insomniacs; this is a real writer who cares about art, not just craft. And he is not alone. Writers of detective fiction have come a long way from the days of Conan Doyle (Sherlock Holmes), Agatha Christie (Miss Marple, Inspector Poirot, and more), Dashiell Hammett (Sam Spade), and Raymond Chandler (Philip Marlowe). There are so many people writing detective and mystery fiction now that bookstores devoted primarily, sometimes exclusively, to this popular genre can be found in every major city. Much of it remains pulp fiction quality, but some of it deserves to be taken seriously as literature.

My first encounter with detective fiction came as a boy when I discovered the Hardy Boys series. I was a regular visitor to the public library and a catholic reader. I especially liked animal stories and biographies of famous people, but I was also an avid reader of the Hardy Boys. I even read a Nancy Drew or two, the Hardy Boys for girls. No sexist, I! In junior high, my taste ran to science fiction, but later in high school I came upon Richard S. Prather and his tough-talking, ultra-cool detective, Shell Scott, my first hard-boiled hero:

“Now,” I told her, “we talk.”

“Poof! I do not wish to talk.”

“Baby, start talking before I start beating you. Now, tell me about what happened after I left earlier.” (48)

I must have read them all . . . well, not every book, of course. After all, there had been “over 22,000,000 SHELL SCOTT books sold,” according to one cover. But I may have read every title. Shell Scott was smart and tough and could get the girls to

do what he wanted, just the kind of guy an adolescent boy could dream of being. No matter that the dialogue and the characters were unpolished and unrealistic. Such niceties were unnecessary at the time. I didn't know the difference between pulp fiction and literary fiction. I wanted only the fantasy of power and seductiveness.

The hard-boiled detective remains my favorite, though I require a bit more sophistication now. I suppose it has to do with unresolved feelings from childhood. I'm sure Freud would say so. I recall the comic books that I read and how they contained ads for a Charles Atlas course aimed at "ninety-seven-pound weaklings." They would be turned into he-men who would never again have sand kicked in their faces at the beach. I never actually had sand kicked in my face (deliberately, anyway), but I *was* a ninety-seven-pound weakling and *did* suffer the humiliation of being a favorite target of a grade-school bully. I used to gaze at those ads and dream of having big muscles and turning the tables on Henry Horseman (his actual name!).

I still love reading of the protagonist's vanquishing the killer-bully in detective fiction, and none does it better than Spenser (no known first name), Robert S. Parker's sensitive, literate, wise-cracking, gourmet tough guy and master of the dry one-liner. In this scene from *Promised Land*, Spenser, a former boxer who stays in training, tries to avoid a fight, but of course the "muscle" for the bad guys thinks he can show up Spenser:

"I'm telling you for the last time. Get lost or get hurt."

I stood up. "Tubbo, if you make me, I can put you in the hospital, and I will. But you probably don't believe me, so I'll have to

prove it. Go ahead. Take your shot.”

He took it, a right-hand punch that missed my head when I moved. He followed up with a left that missed by about the same margin when I moved the other way.

“You’ll last about two minutes doing that,” I said. He rushed at me and I rolled around him. “Meanwhile,” I said, “if I wanted to I could be hitting you here.” I tapped him open-handed on the right cheek very fast three times. He swung again and I stepped a little inside the punch and caught it on my left forearm. I caught the second one on my right. “Or here,” I said and patted him rat-a-tat with both hands on each cheek. The way grandma pats a child. I stepped back away from him. He was already starting to breathe hard. “Some shape you’re in, kid. In another minute you won’t be able to get your arms up.” [. . .]

“I’ll show you, you son of a bitch,” Eddie said and made a grab at me. I moved a step to my right and put a left hook into his stomach. Hard. His breath came out in a hoarse grunt and he sat down suddenly. His face blank, the wind knocked out of him, fighting to get his breath. “Or there.” [. . .]

Rudy said to me, “You got some good punch there.”

“It’s because my heart is pure.” (44-45)

Oh, to have been able to handle Henry Horseman like that! I’m sure that I still

unconsciously wish that I had Spenser's skills, and no doubt that is part of the reason I am drawn to the hard-boiled detectives.

After college—who has time for light reading in college?—I returned to detective fiction through spy novels and “thrillers,” but the more I read of the former, the less I read of the latter. I wasn't sure why, until one day, trying to read the latest Robert Ludlum thriller and finding myself feeling nearly nauseated by the neuron-numbing prose, I realized that he couldn't write. Of course, he can pour out reams of mindless, though intricately plotted, fast-paced narrative, but he cares only about the plot, not about the prose. He wouldn't know a comely but muscular sentence if it smacked him up side the head and sent him sprawling down a snow-spangled mountain slope in an avalanche of arid adjectives. Perhaps my parody is too severe. I'll let him speak for himself:

Her voice came from the kitchen. He raced through the narrow doorway and felt for an instant that he should fall to his knees in supplication. Jane stood gripping the edge of the counter, her back to him, her body shaking, her head nodding up and down. He rushed to her and held her shoulders, his face against her cheek, the spastic rhythm of her movements uninterrupted. [. . .] In her hand she gripped a knife. Hot water had been running over the blade; she had been prepared to give birth alone.

Through the incessant detonations, Victor could hear the aircraft ascending, scrambling to higher altitudes. The strike was

coming to an end; the distant, furious whines of Spitfires converging into the sector was a signal no *Luftwaffe* pilot overlooked. (163)

The rhythm of his sentences rushes us along and conveys the intensity of emotion in the scene, a woman about to give birth in the midst of an air raid, but there is nothing aesthetically pleasing about his prose. The sentences are not especially comely, though they do have a certain masculinity. Ludlum knows how to keep our attention on the action and our nerves on edge. I'll bet the book store manager likes him. Not too many words here.

In his classic discussion of *Aspects of the Novel*, E. M. Forster takes as his point of departure the story itself, which is identified as what happens, and what happens next, and so on. The story appeals to our curiosity. As we read, we ask, "And then what?" The story "is the fundamental aspect without which [the novel] could not exist," but it is also the lowest feature of the novel. Curiosity is not one of our higher distinguishing features as thinking animals. Forster imagines the ur-novelist telling his story:

The primitive audience was an audience of shock-heads, gaping round the campfire, fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros, and only kept awake by suspense. What would happen next? The novelist droned on, and as soon as the audience guessed what happened next, they either fell asleep or killed him. (26)

Ludlum is a story-teller, and his books appeal to the curiosity of their readers. They

want to know what happens next. Even my short example from *The Gemini Contenders* pricks our curiosity. We want to know what happens to that woman already experiencing the contractions of labor.

He kicked his way through the wreckage and the spreading flames and carried his wife out the door. Like an animal seeking sanctuary, he hurried into the woods and found a lair that was their own.

They were together. The frenzy of death that was several hundred yards away could not deter life. He delivered his wife of two male infants. (163-64)

How satisfying! The air raid was coming to an end, the woman delivered, and she had assistance—she didn't have to use that knife on herself after all. (What a thought!) We can pause and catch our breath before Ludlum takes us on the next roller-coaster ride. It is precisely the fast-paced action and emotional tension that makes his books so popular. For those who are interested only in a story to hold their attention, to stimulate their curiosity, Ludlum delivers!

So why did I stop reading him? I actually recall the moment I stopped. I was only a few pages into the book. The protagonist was walking down the platform at a railway station; in the approaching crowd was a villain with murder in mind. I suddenly realized, "I don't really care what happens next." I knew that he would avoid being killed, maybe even avoid being hurt, and that he would kill or subdue the villain, who was not a real person anyway (barely a flat character, to use one of

Forster's terms). He was simply a method of attack. Forster again: "*Qua* story, it can only have one merit: that of making the audience want to know what happens next. And conversely it can only have one fault: that of making the audience not want to know what happens next" (27). I don't recall which of his books I was reading, which may underscore the point, but I put it down and haven't picked up a Ludlum since. There are many people who are happy with another breathless read through the world of Nazi suspense or cold-war espionage, but I am not one of them. For me, that one fault matters: plot alone cannot carry me. If I don't care about the characters or noticeably enjoy the language, I don't really care what happens next.

Forster introduces his chapters on people (characters) with the thought that the novelist who makes us ask "to whom did it happen [. . .] will be appealing to our intelligence and imagination, not merely to our curiosity" (43). Putting aside the question of character for the moment, classic detective fiction appeals to the intelligence by posing puzzles that the detective (and the reader) tries to solve. The best authors leave clues, both actual and spurious, so that the reader can play along, trying to figure out the puzzle before the detective does.

Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and G. K. Chesterton are some of the better-known names in classic detection mysteries, but the best-known detective of all is Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, the master of deduction, who responds to Dr. Watson's, "How the deuce did you know that, Holmes?" with the famous line, "Elementary, my dear Watson, elementary." Actually, Holmes's method is induction rather than deduction, and these lines are not from Conan Doyle's pen but from the

movie series starring Basil Rathbone; but this quibble is not germane. Readers are almost always left with Watson's question on their lips, for there are few of us who know the kinds of things Holmes knows. For example, when he solves "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," he calls upon information from "a little monograph [that he has written] on the ashes of one hundred and forty different varieties of pipe, cigar, and cigarette tobacco[!]." His solution also calls for knowing that the call "Cooee!" is "a distinctly Australian cry, and one which is used between Australians" (213-14), something unknown to most of us. The reader-sleuth who wants to anticipate Holmes is not only at a disadvantage but in an almost impossible position. Doyle uses too many obscure and esoteric facts for that reader. He always made me feel dumb. Others—and there are dozens of Sherlock Holmes clubs around the world with hundreds, maybe thousands, of members—just delight in watching their favorite detective in action. It is enough for them.

I could rarely solve the mystery in classic detection fiction, even the square-dealing ones, and that is undoubtedly one of the reasons I didn't develop a taste for them. But authors can appeal to our intelligence in a way other than presenting puzzles to solve. They can give us interesting information about unfamiliar subjects, and that is one of the things that drew me to Tony Hillerman's mysteries, which show the quiet world of the Navajo disturbed by crime, both Native and white. Hillerman is intensely interested in the American Southwest and has become something of an expert on Navajo history and culture. His series of mysteries has two protagonists, who are, between themselves, sometimes antagonists: Lt. Joe Leaphorn and Sgt. Jim

Chee. Hillerman began writing a series of mysteries that featured both, focusing on each one in alternate books; the other existed in each book but only in the background. Later, perhaps in response to mail from readers, he began to have them working together.

Hillerman's novels usually have a murder at the center of the narrative, but one could say that the aspect of Navajo culture being presented in a novel is as much a focus as the mystery. And there is a different aspect in each of the earlier books. In *The Dark Wind*, for instance, we learn this about Navajo cosmology: "'Three times Sotuknang has destroyed the world,' Lomatewa began. 'He destroyed the First World with fire. He destroyed the Second World with ice.'" I hear an echo of Frost's, "Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice." Could Frost have meant the Navajos? Lomatewa continues:

He destroyed the Third World with flood. Each time he destroyed the world because his people failed to do what he told them to do. [. . .] Sotuknang destroyed the world because the [people] forgot to do their duty. They forgot the songs that must be sung, the *pahos* that must be offered, the ceremonials that must be danced. Each time the world became infected with evil, people quarreled all the time. [. . .] They kept going after money, and quarreling, and gossiping, and forgetting the way of the Road of Life. And each time Sotuknang decided that the world had used up its string, and he saved a few of the best Hopis, and then he destroyed all the rest. (4-5)

How like the Old Testament story of Noah and the Flood; how like the similar flood story from the even older Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*! In all three stories, the people ignore their duty to the gods and their responsibilities to each other; in all three stories, a favored few are saved from a world-destroying flood.

Sometimes an aspect of Navajo custom and culture is unrelated to the crime; other times special knowledge helps solve the crime, as in *People of Darkness*, where Chee and another officer wonder about a reference to a mole as they investigate a curious burglary:

“Maybe it had something to do with an amulet, or a fetish—something like that,” Chee said.

“Of a mole?” Officer Dodge’s voice was incredulous. “What kind of Navajo would use a mole for an amulet?” Officer Dodge left for Gallup without waiting for an answer.

What kind of Navajo would use a mole for an amulet? It was a fair enough question. Chee sat, feet on wastebasket, hands locked behind head, thinking about it. [. . .] The Navajo used representations of the predator Holy People for his amulets. The mole was a predator and much less popular than his more glamorous cousins—the bear, the badger, the eagle, the mountain lion, and so forth. [. . .] Badger was a formidable figure. [. . .] Mole played a trivial role. Why use the mole? He was the predator of the nadir, downward, one of the six sacred directions. He was the symbol of the dark underground. [. . .]

Why pick the mole? The only explanation Chee could think of was the obvious one. The oil well drilled toward the nadir, into the mole's domain. (35-36)

Now Chee has an avenue to investigate: how does drilling an oil well connect to the theft? And, of course, this avenue proves productive. This information is just as esoteric as Holmes's knowledge of Australian tribal cries, but there is a great deal of difference in the way it is presented. We are led along with Officer Chee's thinking, and we learn as we go along rather than being stunned after the fact with a revelation that we could never have anticipated. Hillerman's sort of writing has more respect for the reader; the other is more concerned with the cleverness of the writer.

Hillerman makes me care; I want to know what happens next. Not only that, I care about the characters, and I want to know what happens to *them*.

Lt. Joe Leaphorn is a widower and an aging member of the Navajo Tribal Police, nearing retirement. Already at a loss without his wife, he has little beyond his job to enjoy. Hillerman is brave to have a main character face the difficult question of how to deal with aging, especially when alone. Retirement will put him even deeper into a structureless limbo. He does not look forward to it. And I care what happens to him.

Not only is Sgt. Jim Chee a policeman: he is also studying to become a "singer," a Navajo religious. He is careful and committed. In ceremonial matters, he was a perfectionist. His prayer sticks were painted exactly right, waxed, polished, with exactly the right feathers attached as they should

be attached. The bag that held his pollen was soft doeskin; labeled plastic prescription bottles held the fragments of mica, abalone shell, and the other “hard jewels” his profession required. And his “Four Mountain” bundle—four tiny bags contained in a doeskin sack— included exactly the proper herbs and minerals, which Chee had collected from the four sacred mountains exactly as the *yei* had instructed. (*Skinwalkers* 224)

Each new Jim Chee mystery gives us another of the Navajo rituals that he is learning. I learn along with him. And I care what happens to him.

Leaphorn and Chee are what Forster calls “round” characters. They are three-dimensional, while “flat” characters are, at best, two-dimensional. Round characters have lives beyond the mystery story at the center of the novel. Leaphorn is a widower and lonely. Chee loves his land and his people and their quiet ways, but he is in love with a Navajo lawyer who wants to be part of the fast-paced, modern world, perhaps to become a Washington lobbyist rather than live on the reservation. When she chooses Washington, he remains single and lonely, not unlike Joe Leaphorn.

Every novel needs flat characters. They have, according to Forster, the advantage of being “easily recognized whenever they come in—recognized by the reader’s emotional eye, not by the visual eye,” and “they are easily remembered by the reader afterwards.” All novels have them. Well, almost all. In a droll aside, Forster laments that “in Russian novels, where they so seldom occur, they would be a decided help” (68-69). Detective novels have them in abundance, sometimes in the

reverse of the Russian novel, even to the point that the main characters may be flat (as in Ludlum's and in many other thrillers). Those novels populate pulp fiction. One of the characteristics of good contemporary detective fiction is the presence and development of round characters, like Joe Leaphorn and Jim Chee.

Two more private eyes that I enjoy, also round characters, are Jerome Doolittle's Tom Bethany and Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone. Bethany is a non-professional who hangs around Harvard Square, and having no actual job, he just does people favors. Sometimes they reciprocate, sometimes in cash. He stays in shape and works out with the Harvard wrestling team (titles include *Bear Hug*, *Half Nelson*, *Body Scissors*) because he befriends a graduate student/assistant coach with the team. He exists in no government or public files since literally "dropping out" of sight. He pays only in cash and does not file a tax return. His "office phone" is on the wall of the diner he frequents. He rents an apartment, but under an assumed name. He is the perfect anti-authoritarian, anti-government hero, though his only real illegal activity is his failure to file for and pay income tax. The attraction of these novels is watching him use his wrestling techniques to get out of tight spots and listening to him carp about the establishment. Here are the opening paragraphs of *Half Nelson*:

Like any other university, Harvard sucks. What makes it a great university is that it sucks harder than most.

Back in the 1980's, a Harvard fund-raiser told the newspapers how he planned to meet his five-billion-dollar goal. "You can't get

this kind of money from alumni mailings,” he said. “You have to concentrate on a couple of hundred individuals, most of them in the greater New York area.” The giant sucking noise coming out of Cambridge was about to get deafening, down there in the New York area.

He is always on-the-cheap, which is not surprising for someone who refuses to work and has no actual source of income. When he travels, he usually takes his own car, in which he carries a

nylon equipment bag full of extra blankets and pillows, and a 200-watt bulb for reading. But now my cheapo motel kit was back in Cambridge.

I paid in cash as always, on the general theory that paper trails are bad things to leave behind you. On the same theory I registered as Bartley T. Berger and put down a license plate number that was one digit off.

The management had taped handwritten instructions onto the old dial phone in my room. I followed the instructions with no hope, and I wasn't disappointed. (63)

This is not inspired prose, and no one would expect Anne Tyler to read it for motivation; but the voice is engaging and appeals to my well-disguised, anti-authoritarian, and non-conformist impulses.

Another delightful detective is Sue Grafton's Kinsey Milhone (in a cleverly

titled series working its way from A to Z: “*A*” is for *Alibi*, “*B*” is for *Burglar*, etc.), a divorced and liberated ex-yuppie, freed from marital servitude and on her own, using her brains to outwit the brawn of the crooks. She supplements her work as a private detective, such exciting jobs as “doing a consumer investigative report for a San Diego company concerned about a high-level executive whose background turned out to be something other than he’d represented” (1), by doing equally fascinating reports for an insurance company, primarily investigating fraudulent claims. Obviously, this is not such stuff as mystery buffs’ dreams are made of, but each book finds her getting somehow involved in more dangerous situations than she wants or intends. Here, it is not the mystery plot that appeals as much as the character. In “*H*” *Is for Homicide*, she is confronted by a friend whose wedding she must soon attend:

“How goes the shopping so far?”

“The shopping?” I said blankly. I was still trying to cope with [murder at the insurance company].

“Oh. For the wedding. I’ve got a dress.”

“Bullshit. You only own one dress and it’s black. You’re the maid of honor, not a pallbearer.” Vera and her beloved were getting married in eight days, on Halloween. [. . .] I thought a black dress would be perfect for Halloween nuptials. Once the reception was over we could go trick-or-treating together and maybe pool the take. [. . .]

“Besides, you’ve had that damn dress for five years. [. . .] And

last time you wore it you said it still smelled like a swamp.”

“I washed it!”

“Kinsey, you cannot wear a six-year-old smelly black dress in my wedding. You swore you’d get a new one.”

“I *will*.”

She gave me a flat look, filled with skepticism. “Where will you go to shop? Not K Mart.”

“I wouldn’t go to *K Mart*. I can’t believe you said that.”

I hadn’t the faintest idea what kind of dress to buy. I’ve never been a maid of honor. I don’t have a clue what such maidens wear.

Something useless, I’m sure, with big flounces everywhere. (14-15)

For the record, she wears jeans and black tops, seasonally appropriate, which in Southern California means either T-shirt, turtleneck, or sweater. She keeps the black dress for occasions when she simply can’t wear jeans, such as being in a friend’s wedding. Again, this light and humorous repartee may not be Oscar Wilde, but I find it just as entertaining.

Kinsey Milhone is not the only feisty feminist detective on the street today. There are, for instance, Sara Paretsky’s P.I. Warshawski, who gets into physically threatening situations in spite of being a detective whose skills are primarily those of an accountant; Nevada Barr’s Anna Pigeon, a park ranger, who detects human crime in the beauties of nature; and Patricia Cornwell’s Dr. Kay Scarpetta, chief medical examiner for the state of Virginia, who often teams up with acquaintances at the FBI

facility at Quantico. Reading about their activities is an education in itself: business and accounting, ecology, forensic medicine. And each provides the male reader with insights into the assumptions that frustrate or infuriate women. For example, in Paretsky's *Burn Marks*, when Warshawski, who goes by her nickname, Vic, follows an acquaintance from the police department to a posh political party, she is asked to show her invitation. Michael Furey, her acquaintance, tells the security guard:

“Oh, don't bother her—she's with me.” [. . .]

I fished in my bag for the invitation and held it out, but the guard waved me on without looking at it. This assumption of my relationship to Michael added to my ill humor. [. . .]

Furey caught up with me as I headed toward the bandstand where most of the party was gathered. “Goddamnit, Vic, what's making you so shirty [sic]?”

I stopped to look at him. “Michael, I paid two hundred and fifty dollars for the doubtful pleasure of coming to this shindig. I'm not your date, nor yet ‘the little woman’ whom you can tuck under your arm and hustle past the guards.” (36-37)

He is stunned and exasperated, not knowing what he has done wrong. “I was trying to do you a favor, save you a little hassle with the boys at the gate.” Such small favors, thoughtful from the male point of view, are pebbles strewn in the path of women, for whom they are thoughtless reminders that men still consider women the weaker gender and in need of their care and assistance. None of these writers is a

wordsmith writing at the level of Toni Morrison, but the fact that their fiction is both entertaining and enlightening makes it more than pulp fiction and moves it at least *toward* literature.

Although criminal creativity seems endless, plot patterns do develop, and they can begin to acquire a certain similarity. The inventiveness of authors becomes more and more important in avoiding the dead-end streets of sameness. One avenue of escape from the labyrinth of lassitude is to focus on characterization.

I have stopped reading Cornwell and Paretsky precisely because the plots became so similar and because their central characters, while not entirely flat, were not developed to the extent of some others, like Kinsey Milhone. The plots of Sue Grafton's A-Z series are also becoming less compelling, but that spunky little Kinsey Milhone is always fun to read. I've become more interested in her and her friends than in the mysteries themselves.

Kinsey lives in a converted garage behind a retired baker, Henry Pitts, the aromas from whose kitchen are always enticing her in for a taste and a chat. The garage was bombed in one novel; and Henry has fixed it up for Kinsey, so that it feels like living in a boat. She loves the close quarters.

I'd stayed with Henry until the construction was finished, moving back into the apartment on my birthday the previous May. And what a gift it was, like a pirate ship, all teak and brass fittings, a porthole in the door, a spiral staircase leading up to a loft where I could sleep now beneath a skylight salted with stars. My bed was a

platform with drawers built into the base. [. . .] The entire apartment was fitted with little nooks and crannies of storage space, cupboards, and hidey-holes, pegs for my clothes. The design was all Henry's, and he'd taken a devilish satisfaction out of shaping my surroundings. (18)

He has, in fact, become like the father she never had, and his love for her is demonstrated in the design of her apartment. His character, originally flat, has been rounded over the course of the series. His brother William has come to live with him. Kinsey doesn't cook often and, when home, she usually eats with Henry or at "a tacky little tavern in [her] neighborhood," run by Rosie, an immigrant from Eastern Europe, who both badgers and mothers her. When she was a child, Kinsey lost both her parents in an automobile accident and was raised by an aunt of no particular warmth. Rosie's brusque mothering and Henry's avuncular meddling has made up for some of the losses in Kinsey's life, and Rosie's marrying Henry's brother represents one side of Kinsey's ambivalence about marriage, hers having failed. As the series progresses, the flat characters become rounder. Characters become the focus of my interest, even as interest in the mysteries themselves flags.

Carl Hiaasen's whimsical tales bring another kind of character into the detective genre. Hiaasen is a native Floridian and investigative journalist who decries the development and destruction of South Florida, satirizing it with great humor and comic characters. My favorite is an ex-Vietnam vet who became the governor of Florida on a liberal, Democratic ticket with promises to clean up the corruption of state politics. Unfortunately, he didn't realize how intractable the problems were, and

he has “abdicated” the governorship, disappearing into the swamps, where he lives in an abandoned car (to protect his books from the rain), calls himself Skink, wears a shower cap and Army-issue poncho—and little else—year round, and subsists on road kill! He appears in several of Hiaasen’s novels as a kind of superhero who helps the protagonists in their fight against the criminal element, which often involves legal but immoral activity, namely, the destruction of the South Florida ecology for economic gain.

For Hiaasen, economic interests have turned the morality of society upside down; and he satirizes this inversion in *Strip Tease* by having the most moral characters be a stripper and a bouncer at the club where she works and the most immoral be in government, the worst being Congressman David Lane Dilbeck, hilariously played by Burt Reynolds in the surprisingly-good movie adaptation of the novel.

Such comic characters may be mostly flat or slightly rounded, but that does not keep them from being part of serious literature. Were that not the case, Charles Dickens would be banished from the pantheon of great writers. He used flat characters with abandon, and sometimes had few round ones in a novel at all. He shares with Hiaasen, who is certainly not on the same plane as Dickens, an outrage over social evil and a comic sense of character and scene. That alone should make us consider Hiaasen a serious writer, not merely a journalist or humorist.

Hiaasen doesn’t have a central detective as his hero. In *Strip Tease*, the protagonists are a stripper and a bouncer. Elmore Leonard goes a step further. His

protagonists are often criminals themselves. Leonard began his career writing copy for Chevrolet ads, which may partially explain the clean and spare prose that marks his novels. When he decided to try his hand at fiction, he started with Westerns, first stories for the pulp magazines, later moving into novels. I read somewhere that his *Hombre*, also a successful film, is considered one of the best twenty-five Westerns ever written. Then he turned to crime fiction, at one point starting a series about a detective called Stick. (Both the book and its movie adaptation are titled *Stick*, and Burt Reynolds, again, appears in the movie.)

As his writing skill improved, Leonard's interest turned to the criminal characters that he read about and wrote about. He finds criminals intriguing, and some of his novels have no good guys, only bad guys and worse guys. They are not noble outlaws, just interesting human beings with fewer psychic and social inhibitions than the ones who make a peaceful and organized society possible. They may be more interesting than we and funnier, but thankfully they are fewer. And we can be very thankful that they are not smarter than they are. As James Lee Burke has his detective say in *The Neon Rain*,

Any candid policeman will tell you that we seldom catch people as a result of investigation or detective work; in other words, if we don't grab them during the commission of the crime, there's a good chance we won't catch them at all. When we do nail them, it's often through informers or because they trip over their own shoestrings and turn the key on themselves (drunk driving, expired license plates, a

barroom beef). We're not smart; they're just dumb. (58)

Leonard's novels are known for their witty and realistic dialogue, their interesting or comic characters, and their intricate plotting. His best plots follow several different characters from apparently unrelated scenes and bring them into an unexpected intersection to delight the reader. The second paragraph of *Maximum Bob* demonstrates Leonard's ear for dialogue and his ability to reveal the personality of a character in speech, as Dale Crowe Junior explains to his probation officer how he came to be arrested in a go-go bar:

They move your knees apart to get in close [. . .] so they can put it right in your face. This one's name was Earlene. I told her I wasn't interested, she kept right on doing it, so I got up and left. The go-go whore starts yelling I owe her five bucks and this bouncer come running over. I give him a shove was all, go outside and there's a green-and-white parked by the front door waiting. The bouncer, he tries to get tough then, showing off, so I give him one, popped him good thinking the deputies would see he's the one started it. Shit, they cuff me, throw me in the squad car, won't even hear my side of it. Next thing, they punch me up on this little computer they have? The one deputy goes, "Oh, well look it here. He's on probation. Hit a police officer." Well, then they're just waiting for me to give 'em a hard time. And you don't think I wasn't set up. (1-2)

Leonard catches the speech pattern of the street perfectly, with the run-on sentences

and elliptical phrasing, the wrong tensing of verbs, the rising interrogative pattern on a statement (“[. . .] on this little computer they have?”), the double negative. He also portrays the criminal’s self-serving rationalization and projection of blame. Dale encounters three separate people, and all are “out to get him.” He isn’t to blame for anything: “I told her I wasn’t interested”; “I give him a shove was all”; the police “won’t even hear my side of it.” In one paragraph, Leonard has captured this character’s speech pattern, his way of thinking, the kinds of places he frequents, and his background of aggressive behavior.

Leonard also knows his limitations. I read an interview in which he said that he just wasn’t good with metaphors and similes, so he avoided them. When I tried to read a Shell Scott novel not long ago, I couldn’t. It hadn’t mattered to me in high school, but it was clear now that Prather didn’t have the self-critical ear that Leonard does. Leonard would never have submitted these tropes to an editor: “She looked hotter than a welder’s torch,” “Up till now the floor show had been getting less attention than the rest rooms” (5), “We clicked like two dice rolling up a seven” (64). Prather had no qualms, and neither did the publisher of *The Case of the Vanishing Beauty*. Of course, it made no pretensions to be anything other than pulp fiction.

Knowing one’s limitations, as well as one’s strengths, is the mark of the consummate professional—in any field. Mystery writers all know how to develop a plot that will draw in their audience. Some are intricate and complex, others interesting and informative; some humorous, others deadly serious; some fantastic, others realistic. But the focus on plot development alone, with little or no attention to

characterization and language, marks a second-rate, generic, or novice talent. I have moved away from reading for the story; I now read for the writing. And my two favorite writers are Elmore Leonard, with his quirky, criminal characters, delightful dialogue, and sometimes intricate plots, and James Lee Burke, because of the power of his prose. Burke doesn't have the light touch of Grafton or Doolittle, the humor of Hiaasen or Leonard, but his writing has a depth and power that lifts him above the others. His poetic prose creates a steamy and intense Louisiana backdrop for the self-destructive, alcoholic Dave Robicheaux.

I recently reread *The Neon Rain*, the first in the Dave Robicheaux series, to see how it stood up to time. I was surprised by what I found, for it was better than I had remembered it. All the elements that made Burke the artist I consider him to be were there, not fully developed, naturally, but in nascent form. When I first read the book, I was not especially impressed, having picked it up on a recommendation from a friend. I was probably more aware of the plot than the prose and probably thought that Dave Robicheaux was just another alcoholic cop bent as much on self-destruction as bringing bad guys to justice. It was good enough that I wanted to continue, I must add; but it wasn't until the second or third novel in the series that I realized just how powerful Burke's writing about alcoholism is. At about the same time, I was reading Lawrence Sanders' similarly powerful writing on the inner experience of the alcoholic in his Matthew Scudder series, which may have helped sensitize me to Burke's Robicheaux. Scudder is also an alcoholic whose self-destructiveness gets him tossed from the NYPD, paralleling Robicheaux's problems with the New Orleans PD.

When I did finally notice, I said to friends that either Burke was an alcoholic himself and a terrific writer, able to portray so powerfully and convincingly the inner experience of the alcoholic, or he was a truly *great* writer, able to imagine the experience and write so well about it. I have since discovered that he is, indeed, a recovered alcoholic who attends AA meetings weekly, usually twice a week. (Block refuses to comment publicly on whether he is an alcoholic.)

Burke captures, beautifully and horribly, sensitively and powerfully, the terror that is the alcoholic's world. Dave Robicheaux describes it as "a surreal world where dragons and monsters frolicked" (136), where the D.T.'s "covered me with sweat and filled the inside of my houseboat with spiders and dead Vietnamese" (115), where "my head felt as though it had been stunned with Novocain, my mouth hung open uncontrollably, my chin and neck were slick with vomit, the sickening sweet stench of excrement rose from my trousers" (117), where "my face was numb, dead to the touch, stretched tight across the skull the way skin is over a death's head [. . .] then an awful taste rose out of my stomach, my head pitched forward, and I felt something like wet newspaper rip loose inside my chest and then I heard a splattering through the steering wheel on the floorboards" (118).

Dave had been sober for four years, and it was not his own decision to start drinking again. Rather, the bad guys force a cocktail down his throat, a mixture of beer, whiskey, castor oil, and Quaaludes. Then they put him in his car with a federal agent whom they have been torturing, and they run the car off an overpass, making it appear that Dave's drinking killed both him and the agent. Dave survives, but they

have still succeeded in pushing him back into drinking and discrediting him on the job, from which he is suspended without pay and blamed for the federal agent's death. With unflinching honesty, however, he does not blame others for what has happened to him; and earlier he had given us a foreshadowing of what was to come: "I'd written my own script, and the next morning I continued to write it, only with some disastrous consequences that made me wonder if my alcoholic, self-destructive incubus was not alive and well" (82).

Burke rescues him from this and other perilous situations, which is typical of detective fiction, and he is discredited at work, another scenario frequently used in this sub-genre; but he has thrown his hero into another danger, back into his alcoholism and self-defeating patterns of behavior. A lesser writer would have needed only to contrive an escape from the immediate peril; Burke provides the escape but keeps the pressure on his protagonist, who will now have to fight his inner demons as well as the outside forces of evil. Detective fiction and other types of thrillers, like the older romance and mythic tale, symbolize in externalized danger the inner struggle of man with himself and with life; mainstream modern literature usually focuses more directly on the inner struggle itself. Burke manages to do both, thereby having his fiction stand with one foot in the detective genre and one foot in serious fiction. Dave says at one point, "What happens outside of us doesn't count" (59). What happens "outside" in Burke's fiction is the violence of a subculture infected by the Mob, by drug lords, and by corrupt cops and government officials, but what happens "inside" is Dave's struggle with his memories of Vietnam and his battle

against alcoholism.

If Burke speaks with the authority of personal experience in Dave Robicheaux's battle with alcoholism, he may speak vicariously for a nation dealing with the guilt, the stigma, and the folly of Vietnam. I find no reference to Burke's having served in the military; but when he writes of the "one experience that encapsulated my year in Vietnam" (157), I have to wonder if the DLB simply overlooked including the information. The following incident not only has the symbolic attributes of speaking for a nation's futile experience there, but it has also the verisimilitude of personal participation or witness. Dave naps as his men take an afternoon splash in the shallows of a brown river. He awakens to the sound of giggling and the smell of marijuana. A water buffalo, a farmer's work animal, has become endangered in the middle of the river, and Dave watches along with the others in his platoon, as two American soldiers try to help:

Two cousins from Conroe, Texas, had waded in after the buffalo with a lariat they had fashioned from a rope they had taken out of the back of a Marine Corps six-by. Their brown backs were wet and ridged with muscle and vertebrae, and they were grinning and laughing and flinging out their lariat with all the stoned confidence of nineteen-year-old cowboys.

"There's drop-offs out there," I said.

"Watch this, Lieutenant," one of them called back. "We'll slide this honker out slicker than a hog's pecker."

Then suddenly out of the brown current I saw the gnarled, black roots of a floating tree break through the surface and reach into the air like an enormous claw.

It hit them broadside with such force that their faces went white. Their mouths gasped open, then spit water. They tried to push away from the roiling, yellow foam around the tree and the roots that spiked their eyes and twisted their faces into contortions. The tree spun around in the current, shining with mud, caught new momentum, and pressed them under. We waited [. . .] but we never saw them again. (158)

Seeing a Vietnamese farmer in a situation that he could not handle, these American soldiers stepped in to help, only to be surprised and overcome by unsuspected, indigenous forces that were too much for them, as a helpless public looked on in horror. Burke encapsulates the American experience in Vietnam in this one symbolic scene.

If it was the legacy of one generation of Americans to face squarely the hubris and tragedy of its experience in Vietnam, it is the individual sober alcoholic's fate to face squarely the constant, daily awareness of his potential for self-destructiveness. Even when sober, Dave never takes the careful, less dangerous course of action. He never gives an inch to anyone, neither to Internal Affairs as they investigate what happened to him in the death of the Treasury agent already mentioned, nor to the bad guys, whether they come after him or he goes after them, which he just can't resist

doing. His obstinacy may provide the action that is so important to this type of fiction, but Burke seems to revel in it, giving Robicheaux virtually no ability to step back or to sit things out. That makes the dénouement of this novel ring just a little false, and I shall have more to say about its ending.

It has been noticed by psychologists that the police are more like criminals than they are like the average person. They just have more adaptive and socially sanctioned controls for their behavior. Investigative journalism and television reports reveal that those controls are sometimes less adaptive than we would like for them to be. Dave observes, “it seemed sometimes that the best of us became most like the people whom we loathed” (149). I don’t know whether it is intentional, but Burke dramatizes how “cops and robbers” are reverse sides of the same coin by having Dave’s brother, Jimmie, not a twin but very close in appearance, flirt with the other side of the law and become involved with one of the New Orleans mobsters. Dave reflects: “whenever a good cop took a big fall, he could never look back and find that exact moment when he made a hard left turn down a one-way street” (149). In one of my favorite lines, a fallen man stands in court convicted; and “when asked if he had anything to say before sentencing, he stared up at the judge, the rings of fat on his neck trembling, and replied, ‘Your Honor, I have no idea how I got from *there* to *here*’” (149).

The mystery genre gives the writer a convenient way to know that the story is over. It’s over when the mystery has been solved or when the antagonist, occasionally the protagonist, has been vanquished, usually killed or jailed. The writer

then has little to do but wrap up any remaining loose ends and send his gumshoe off to bed (with the broad, of course), and this is essentially what Burke does in *The Neon Rain*.

As the novel draws to a close, Dave confronts the retired Army officer who was involved in one thread of criminal activity in the story; but he lets the confrontation go with an explanation of why the general had become involved. The general apologizes for getting Dave involved, but Dave tells him to read St. John of the Cross (*Long Night of the Soul*): “It’s a long night, General. Don’t try to get through it with apologies. They’re all right between gentlemen, but they don’t have much value for the dead” (277). He leaves, expecting that the general will be arrested in the course of events, and offers an epilogue: “It was time for somebody else to fight the wars” (280)—something that he couldn’t have said at any other point in the book. Unfortunately we haven’t been given any reason for his having changed. We have been expecting him, the tenacious, relentless, and headstrong Dave Robicheaux, to be charging into a den of thieves and blowing them away in a macho blast of gunfire and shattering glass (the favorite sport of every action director in Hollywood). I prefer this rather subdued climax, but it is uncharacteristic of the barely controlled Robicheaux of the rest of the novel.

In subsequent books, we find that Dave hasn’t really changed, and the unevenness here is probably best understood as Burke’s lack of success in closing what was really his first detective novel. It was early in his career as a writer. I also sense that he wasn’t expecting to write a sequel, much less a whole series; for he

solves Dave's partner's problems, both marital and departmental, by having him run away with the disgrace of murder-for-hire over his head to Central America, where his way of doing things outside the law is only too welcome, suggesting that Burke did not plan to bring the two of them back together.

Burke resolves Dave's own anti-authoritarian problems by having him resign from the police force. He has already "won the girl," so he and Annie virtually sail off into the sunset, moving his houseboat up-river from New Orleans to New Iberia to set up housekeeping. This resolution fits well with a traditional "happy ending" but is rather pedestrian.

Psychotherapists know that termination is one of the hardest parts of any therapy—hard for the patient, hard for the therapist. I have noticed that endings can be difficult for writers and film makers, as well. It is easy to illustrate this problem by recalling two of the most popular films ever made (*ET: The Extraterrestrial* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*), which were all but spoiled for me by what I consider to be dreadful endings. Neither made my list of favorite movies, but I did enjoy both until the endings, both of which seemed forced: *ET* becoming suddenly syrupy and sentimentalized, a break from the previously well-imagined and even believable story, and *Raiders* shifting gears implausibly into some sort of surreal supernaturalism that had virtually no connection with the previous adventure story. It was after seeing the weak endings of these films that I made the connection between film, writing, and therapy: "termination issues" are always difficult to deal with.

Although the easy resolution of Dave's difficulties is somewhat forced, the

writing at the end of the novel remains fine. Leaving the general's house, Dave goes to a streetcar stop, where

an elderly black woman who waited at the stop with me carried a flowered umbrella hooked on her arm. She wore a pillbox hat clamped down on her small head.

“It gonna rain frogs by tonight,” she said. “First it get hot and windy, then it smell like fish, then lightning gonna jump all over my little house.” [. . .]

Out over the Gulf I heard a long peal of thunder, like a row of ancient cannon firing in a diminishing sequence. The black lady shook her head gravely and made a wet, humming sound in the back of her throat. (278)

Burke returns us to normality in this one scene with its one neatly drawn characterization, and the only threat to our peace now comes from the distant thunder.

Here are the final sentences of the novel:

Annie and I rode on the boat the last few miles into New Iberia, and we ate crawfish *étouffée* on the deck and watched our wake slip up into the cypress and oak trees along the bank, watched yesterday steal upon us—the black people in straw hats, cane-fishing for goggle-eye perch, the smoke drifting out through the trees from barbecue fires, the crowds of college-age kids at fish-fries and crab-boils in the city park, the red leaves that tumbled out of the sky and settled like a whisper on

the bayou's surface. It was the Louisiana I had grown up in, a place that never seemed to change, where it was never a treason to go with the cycle of things and let the season have its way. The fall sky was such a hard blue you could have struck a match against it, the yellow light so soft it might have been aged inside oak. (281)

We are left in a scene as soft and quiet as the previous action has been harsh and violent: in “yellow light so soft it might have been aged inside oak” with red leaves that “settled like a whisper on the bayou's surface.” Setting, mood, tone. Too many words? Not for me.

A Shot in the Dark

Cold steamy air blew in through two open windows, bringing with it half a dozen times a minute the Alcatraz foghorn's dull moaning. [. . .] San Francisco's night-fog, thin, clammy, and penetrant, blurred the street.

—Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*

Rain filled the gutters and splashed knee-high off the sidewalk. Big cops in slickers that shone like gun barrels had a lot of fun carrying giggling girls across the bad places.

—Raymond Chandler, *The Big Sleep*

The house on the mesa was dark and silent. Nothing stirred inside or out, but the shrill sighing of the cicadas rising and falling in the empty fields. I knocked on the door and waited, shivering in my clothes. There was no wind, but the night was cold. The insect cry sounded like wind in autumn trees.

—Ross Macdonald, *The Drowning Pool*

Rain, fog, wind, darkness, especially the darkness of night: characteristics of the noir genre, whether fiction or film. Many of my friends and colleagues who also read detective fiction have asked whether I am a fan of noir. They almost seem to expect it. After all, we have other things in common—wouldn't we share this interest as well? So it has occurred to me more than once to wonder why I don't read in this sub-genre of detective fiction. Since the so-called hard-boiled detectives are my favorites and the heroes of the noir novels, such as Sam Spade and Philip Marlowe, certainly qualify as hard-boiled detectives, it would seem likely that I would; but, in fact, I have not really read much in the noir genre. In my mind, the genre is tainted by the movie versions of the novels: Humphrey Bogart plays Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* and Marlowe in *The Big Sleep*, and neither movie holds any particular appeal for me. Nor have I been a notable fan of Orson Welles's or Alfred Hitchcock's noir films. I suspect that because I haven't liked the films, I have assumed I wouldn't like

the novels; so I decided to read these two traditional noir detective stories to find out what I actually do think of them. They are certainly considered classics, and it seemed only fair, both to them and to me, to have my opinions influenced by actually having read them.

I decided to include Ross Macdonald's *The Drowning Pool* in my little investigation for a couple of reasons. First, because I saw him as a transitional writer between the true noir writers of the early twentieth century and the burgeoning bevy of mystery writers who appeared in the latter part of the century. The near-decimal-like symmetry of their publication dates appeals to me as well, Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) heralding the '30s; Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep* (1939), the '40s; and Ross Macdonald's *The Drowning Pool* (1950) ushering in the '50s. The second reason I wanted to look at Macdonald is that his detective is named Lew Archer, and Sam Spade's partner in *The Maltese Falcon* is named Miles Archer, the first chapter even being entitled "Spade & Archer." Their association in that book is short-lived, however, as Archer is killed in the next chapter; and I wondered if Macdonald's naming his detective Lew Archer may not have been a sly homage to Hammett, who is regarded by some as the father of the modern mystery novel, especially of the noir and the hard-boiled type.

The first thing that struck me when reading *The Maltese Falcon* was that Humphrey Bogart is Sam Spade! Bogie speaks from the pages of the book. Listen for yourself:

"You'll tell it to me or you'll tell it in court," [Detective]

Dundy said hotly. “This is murder and don’t you forget it.”

“Maybe. [Spade replies.] And here’s something for you to not forget, sweetheart. I’ll tell it or not as I damned please. It’s a long while since I burst out crying because policemen didn’t like me.” (18)

It may be written as *sweetheart*, but it sounds in my head as Bogie’s inimitable *shweethaart*. Of course, the dialogue was originally Hammett’s and was used extensively in the screenplay; but Bogart is so identified with Sam Spade that the images that rise from the page as I read play across my mind in the black and white of the movie, and the effect is reinforced by the written words’ similarity to those in the familiar film. That effect, while interesting in itself, nevertheless sustains my prejudice. I wasn’t wild about the movie; I’m not wild about the book.

But what about the words? I can forgive a lot if the words are well-chosen and interesting. I paid attention to Hammett’s language as I read, watching for the engaging turn of phrase, the clever and unexpected metaphor or simile. I was disappointed. For instance, Hammett describes Spade as having a certain fiendish look about him. He is introduced on the first page of the novel as looking “rather pleasantly like a blond Satan.” I marked how little Humphrey Bogart looks like a blond Satan and then tried to forget it, wanting to judge the written Spade for himself, not from Bogart’s portrayal. Later, “Spade turn[s] to hold his lighter under the end of [a woman’s] cigarette. His eyes were shiny in a wooden Satan’s face” (50). And again, “his grin lewd as a satyr’s” (155). I have to give Hammett some points for consistency, for continuing to remind the reader of Spade’s devilish appearance; but

his phrasing is not impressive. The blond Satan is workmanlike; but the lewd satyr's grin is trite, and the wooden satan's face is . . . well, wooden. So, too, here: Spade delivers a knockout punch to an adversary, who then "shut his eyes and was unconscious" (41). Perhaps that was meant to be witty, but it strikes me as self-consciously arty rather than funny, clumsy rather than comely. When Spade grasps the figurine that is the Maltese Falcon, Hammett writes a line as stiff and cold as the bird itself: "His widespread fingers had ownership in their curving" (142).

Hammett's metaphors and similes are not more interesting. The gal that has hired Spade's services is a young woman of some exuberance. When she and Spade are confronted by their adversaries, she seems to be robbed "of that freedom of personal movement and emotion that is animal, leaving her alive, conscious, but quiescent as a plant" (155). Quiescent as a plant? Accurate, perhaps, but unengaging and unimaginative, even though *quiescent* is an unusual and unexpected word. And in this sentence, it stands out awkwardly. Here is another metaphor: "Her eyes were warm green discs" (18). Also unengaging and unimaginative. The best simile I found was "A high thin moon was cold and feeble as the distant street-light" (149). The adjectives are apt, since the line strikes me as both cold and feeble.

Much of the language is melodramatic, as well. Here is the girl imploring Spade to help her: "I want you to save me from—from it all," she replied in a thin tremulous voice. She put a timid hand on his sleeve." She continues in this vein on the next page:

She went down on her knees at his knees. She held her face up

to him. Her face was wan, taut, and fearful over tight-clasped hands. “I haven’t lived a good life,” she cried. “I’ve been bad—worse than you could know—but I’m not all bad. Look at me, Mr. Spade. You know I’m not all bad, don’t you? You can see that, can’t you? Then can’t you trust me a little? Oh, I’m so alone and afraid, and I’ve got nobody to help me if you won’t help me. [. . .] But be generous, Mr. Spade, don’t ask me to be fair. You’re generous, Mr. Spade, don’t ask me to be fair. You’re strong, you’re resourceful, you’re brave. You can spare me some of that strength and resourcefulness and courage, surely. Help me, Mr. Spade. Help me because I need help so badly, and because if you don’t where will I find anyone who can, no matter how willing?” (30)

It’s a wonder he does agree to help her. Such melodramatic mewling puts me off, and I wonder how Spade is drawn in by it. Of course, it is of a formula, and it works for pulp fiction, but not for me. Defenders of noir fiction in general and Sam Spade in particular may say that Hammett was writing in a different era, when detective fiction was nearly all pulp fiction, and that Hammett was raising it to a new level, but that does not mean that it rises to a level that I can call art.

* * * * *

From the opening, Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep* is better than *The Maltese Falcon*. On the first page, Marlowe calls upon a prospective client, entering his palace-like home, whose “entrance doors [. . .] would have let in a troop of Indian

elephants.” He notices

a broad stained-glass panel showing a knight in dark armor rescuing a lady who was tied to a tree and didn’t have any clothes on but some very long and convenient hair. [. . .] He was fiddling with the knots on the ropes that tied the lady to the tree and not getting anywhere. I stood there and thought that if I lived in the house, I would sooner or later have to climb up there and help him. (3-4)

The first time I read those lines, I smiled at the humor in the final sentence.

(Actually, I smile *each* time I read it.) It’s the kind of wry facetiousness I like, especially with its double entendre. Marlowe may mean that he would eventually have to lend a helping hand to the unknotting knight, but there is also, of course, the sexual innuendo of his eventually succumbing to the enticement of the naked lady.

As I considered the scene further, I saw that there is much more in that panel than the mere impetus for Marlowe’s quip. The knight’s plight in this panel is symbolic of the entire detection genre. The modern detective is frequently, like this knight, attempting to help a woman in distress; often he literally has to rescue her from danger, and he is always trying to unravel some knotty mystery. Furthermore, I thought how like Keats’s urn was this stained-glass panel, with its knight forever caught in his quest to rescue the maiden, the two of them frozen in time like Keats’s lovers. The lack of movement even suggests the sluggish standstill that characterizes so many investigations before they finally break open. I have no idea whether Chandler had the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” in mind as he wrote, but whether or no, the

allusion is there; and recognizing it has lifted Chandler in my estimation. I had seen no such potentialities in Hammett.

As Marlowe waits under the glass panel for the butler to return and bring him to the master of the place, a girl comes in, pretty, smartly outfitted, with “a beautiful body, small, lithe, compact, firm,” (35) but whose “face lacked color and didn’t look too healthy” (5). She speaks to him:

“Tall aren’t you?” she said.

“I didn’t mean to be.”

Her eyes rounded. She was puzzled. She was thinking. I could see, even on that short acquaintance, that thinking was always going to be a bother to her. (5)

The wry humor again. These quips remind me of Spenser, Robert B. Parker’s hard-boiled, one-named private eye, who is for me the master of the dry one-liner. Either of these insouciant wisecracks could as easily have come from Spenser as from Marlowe. How fitting, then, that Parker completed Chandler’s last and unfinished manuscript, *Poodle Springs*, and later wrote another Philip Marlowe novel, *Perchance to Dream*, a sequel to *The Big Sleep*. Parker has Chandler’s sensibility and is clearly his rightful heir.

Where Chandler peppers his narrative with occasional humor, Hammett makes but few attempts to spice up his. Here is the only one I found noteworthy. A girl, young and attractive, having found her usual feminine wiles unsuccessful, shifts her assault on Spade’s dogged refusal to be drawn in by adding a bit of fun: “Mr.

Spade, I'm not at all the sort of person I pretend to be. I'm eighty years old, incredibly wicked, and an ironmolder by trade" (*Maltese Falcon* 49). I actually like that last line quite a bit, but I had to read it twice because it seemed so out of kilter with Hammett's usually prosaic narrative thrust. Chandler, on the other hand, gives us a girl who "tried to keep a cute little smile on her face but her face was too tired to be bothered" (*Big Sleep* 64). I can reread this line again and again to savor its piquant wit.

Chandler is no James Lee Burke; he sometimes plays the typical note of the pulp noir novel. Marlowe can also sound a lot like Spade. For instance, "She approached me with enough sex appeal to stampede a businessmen's lunch" (23). And here is another line with a similar feel: "She was worth a stare. She was trouble" (17). It, too, could come from virtually any of the noir-genre detectives; but Marlowe follows it with a description of the girl's body that concludes with a nice trope: "ankles long and slim and with enough melodic line for a tone poem." Now, we hear something a little more interesting than the simple masculine interest of men being herded like cattle by their concupiscence. Would Sam Spade even know what a tone poem is, much less appreciate the suggestion of a woman's looks inspiring the melodic line for such a composition?

When Marlowe finally meets that prospective client in the first chapter, he finds a rich, old, dying man in his hot and humid orchid greenhouse. Even the vestibule, Marlowe notes, is "as warm as a slow oven" (7). And in the greenhouse proper, "[the old man's] clasped hand rested peacefully on the edge of the [lap] rug,

and the heat, which made me feel like a New England boiled dinner, didn't seem to make him even warm" (12-13). A greenhouse vestibule "as warm as a slow oven." How much more clever (and evocative) than Spade's "quiescent as a plant"! I felt "like a New England boiled dinner." How droll compared to Spade's "he shut his eyes and was unconscious"! Chandler knows how to make a simile live.

While Chandler's work is clearly rooted in the soil of the pulp detective novel, it shows more promise of literary bloom than Hammett's, if only because the language is more colorful. Both Spade and Marlowe exhibit the tough arrogance characteristic of the hard-boiled detective, but Spade is heavy-handed and blunt. Hammett has a police detective say, "You've got away with this and you've got away with that, but you can't keep it up forever." He then writes, "'Stop me when you can,' Spade replied arrogantly" (63). Marlowe is lighter and self-deprecating: "I snicked a match on my thumbnail and *for once* it lit" (19; my emphasis). And again, "I was fired for insubordination. I test very high on insubordination, General" (10).

Chandler's language can be trite and uninspired: "I can believe that whatever you know about all this is under glass, or there would be a flock of johns squeaking sole leather around this dump" (75). Or light and amusing, as when a twenty-something vixen has made an inept and silly attempt to seduce him and Marlowe says to the butler, "You ought to wean her. She looks old enough" (7). Chandler moves beyond Hammett and edges the noir novel toward literature. Seeing heel marks in the earth as evidence of a body having been dragged away, Marlowe delivers my favorite line in the novel, "Dead men are heavier than broken hearts" (42).

* * * * *

If Chandler nudges the noir novel toward literature, Ross Macdonald gives it a hefty shove. He, too, can exhibit the language and dialogue typical of noir, but he often rises above it. Here is a girl similar to the one quoted above from Hammett; she doesn't go to the length of the former, but she, too, begs for the detective's help, presenting herself as weak and needy, barely strong enough to ask for it: "You won't ask me any questions will you? I'm so tired. This business has taken more out of me than you think" (117). And the following words could have come from Spade or any other noir detective: "Then they ventilated [him] with a dozen slugs and gave him a gasoline barbecue" (151). I wouldn't know whether the following line was from Macdonald or from either one of the others: "She was dressed to attract attention. [. . .] I gave her attention" (37). But such standard diction is only half the story with Macdonald's language.

The other half includes metaphors and similes that are clearly better than Hammett's or Chandler's, and *The Drowning Pool* presents a veritable cornucopia for quotation. Macdonald often focuses on the sensuous, especially on sound. Here are two lively similes: "Hurt and rage buzzed like blundering insects in his tone" (33), and "He spat out words in Spanish that sounded like a string of cheap firecrackers" (84). He can also be attuned to the quietness in a scene, as in these softer similes: "Over my head a red-flowering eucalyptus moved in a wind as soft as night-time breathing" (94), and "Our feet were soundless as undertakers' on the thickly carpeted floor" (193). The last brings an awareness of tactile sensation, as well.

In describing a busy restaurant, Chandler captures the bustle and energy in this choice metaphor: “The waitresses came and went in an antlike stream” (82). On a completely different note, he suggests the potential for power and movement in this simile: “Four or five heavy trucks had gathered like buffalo at a waterhole” (182). The weight of this image is in keeping with the general tone of the noir novel, which tends to be heavy and oppressive, dark and gloomy; but Macdonald’s novel also has a light side.

There is literally more sunshine in his novel, and his language can be lighter, as well: “I left my car [. . .] and crossed the terraced lawn, dodging the rainbowed spray from a sprinkling system” (28), and later, “sprinklers were whirling lariats of spray” (124). These two visual metaphors focus literally on aspects of light interacting with water, lighting and lightening the setting in which they occur, in a lightsome language completely absent in Hammett and Chandler. Macdonald seems comfortable in both realms: the world of sunshine and light as well as the world of darkness and shadow.

Another visual image, this one more intense and more powerful than the previous two, focuses not just on light but on color: “The clouds were writhing with red fire, as if the sun had plunged in the invisible sea and set it flaming. Only the mountains stood out dark and firm against the conflagration of the sky” (45). Here are light and darkness as well as a suggestion of disorder in the flaming conflagration of the sky, an image that alludes, even if obliquely, to the discord that has been brought to a social order by the murder that is the center of the novel’s mystery. The

more frequent occurrence of light in Macdonald's writing reinforces the notion of his being on the cusp between the true noir novel and later detective fiction.

The Drowning Pool remains, nevertheless, in the line of noir novels and has its share of darkness and fog; but even in the dark, Macdonald does more with setting and mood than either Hammett or Chandler. When Lew Archer has an assignation on an ocean pier, Macdonald gives us more than a simple description of person and place; he gives us more than a sentence that places Archer in the foggy night. He gives us two lengthy paragraphs that do more than create just a setting; he develops a mood in rich and sensuous language that is totally lacking in either of the other two novels. Here's part of one of those paragraphs:

The smell of the sea, of kelp and fish and bitter moving water, rose stronger in my nostrils. It flooded my consciousness like an ancestral memory. The swells rose sluggishly and fell away, casting up dismal gleams between the boards of the pier. And the whole pier rose and fell in stiff and creaking mimicry, dancing its long slow dance of dissolution. I reached the end and saw no one, heard nothing but my footsteps and the creak of the beams, the slap of waves on the pilings. It was a fifteen-foot drop to the dim water. The nearest land ahead of me was Hawaii. (183)

The last sentence does serve to locate Lew Archer geographically in L.A. [L.A., Los Angeles; L.A., Lew Archer. I wonder whether that was accidental or intentional?]

That last sentence does more, however; it suggests the loneliness and isolation of the

protagonist, something Archer shares with most of the central figures of detective fiction.

Something else I noticed in Macdonald's language is his occasional appeal to more than one of the senses. In the above paragraph, for instance, he refers, directly or indirectly, to four of our five senses, omitting only taste. The passage opens with smells: the smell of the sea, the kelp, the fish, and the water. Macdonald even links smell to "ancestral memory," an interesting connection, since smell is the most primitive sense and the one most closely related to memory. Next comes a reference to vision in the "dismal gleams between the boards of the pier." When Archer reaches the end of the pier, he hears the creaking beams but sees no one—direct references to both sound and vision. There is even an indirect appeal to tactile sensation when Archer feels the pier's movement. Macdonald calls it dancing, and we feel (in our minds at least) the rhythmic swaying of the pier in the waves as if it were a kind of dance.

In another place, Macdonald gives us this lively bit of synesthesia: "The trickle of melody gradually filled the room like clear water, and the bubbling chatter subsided" (52). What an elegant mixture of sight, sound, and texture! The only other detective writer that I'm aware of who appeals to multiple senses is James Lee Burke, whose vibrant language and synesthetic imagery conjure vivid settings and contribute directly to creating the mood and tone of his scenes.

In contrast to Chandler's evocative paragraph about Archer on the pier, when Sam Spade goes into the San Francisco night to identify his murdered partner,

Hammett sets the scene in straightforward and descriptive but lackluster language:

Where Bush Street roofed Stockton before slipping
downhill to Chinatown, Spade paid his fare and left the taxicab.
San Francisco's night-fog, thin, clammy, and penetrant, blurred
the street. A few yards from where Spade had dismissed the
taxicab a small group of men stood looking up an alley. [. . .]

Spade crossed the sidewalk between iron-railed hatchways that
opened above bare ugly stairs, went to the parapet, and, resting his
hands on the damp coping, looked down into Stockton Street. An
automobile popped out of the tunnel beneath him with a roaring swish,
as if it had been blown out, and ran away. (11)

We see the scene clearly, but it doesn't have the intensity and resonance of language that Macdonald gives us. We might even take note of the automobile's "popping out of the tunnel as if it had been blown out" and think how much that image lacks compared with Macdonald's antlike stream of waitresses.

Another example of such differences occurs in some descriptions of large old houses. Here are Chandler's two sentences of solid, straightforward, descriptive prose. He writes of a house that was "the size of a carbarn, with a red sandstone porte-cochere built on to one side and a couple of acres of soft rolling lawn in front. It was one of those solid old-fashioned houses which it used to be the thing to move bodily to new locations as the city grew westward" (105). Chandler gives us a sense of the size of the house and the type it represents, even suggesting its place in the

expansion of Southern California. But consider what Macdonald does in two sentences. “The houses were Victorian mansions, their gables and carved cornices grotesque against the sky. Now they were light-housekeeping apartments and boarding houses, wearing remnants of sleazy grandeur” (87). He catches the passing of an era (Victorian to modern) in language that not only shows us the changes but creates a mood that reveals the nature of modernization and how it can devalue and denigrate as well as replace the past. And he does it in less than half as many words. Chandler uses fifty-eight words, Macdonald only twenty-eight.

I thought that the difference in tone might be accounted for by Macdonald’s having used more “big” words, as a glance at the two passages would suggest. I was surprised to find, however, that there was no statistical difference in the number of polysyllabic words. [I counted each part of a hyphenated word as an individual word because it made more sense when counting syllables.] Both authors use the same number of two-syllable words (eleven). Macdonald uses three three-syllable words, while Chandler uses two—hardly a difference. Macdonald does use one four-syllable word, whereas Chandler uses none; but *Victorian* is scarcely a “thesaurus word.” The only real numerical difference is in the count of single-syllable words. It would seem that Macdonald does something complex and suggestive with his words, contributing more to mood and ambience, while Chandler uses words that do little more than describe a scene.

The most surprising aspect of *The Drowning Pool* was the number of literary references, and even one to an important figure in psychology. Karen Horney

(HORN-eye) was a leading apologist for psychoanalytic psychology in the 1940s; and Macdonald mentions her directly: “The book in her hand, when she laid it down on the cushion between us, turned out to be a book on psychoanalysis by Karen Horney” (29). Archer seems to be as surprised to find this seductive spoiled-little-rich-girl reading such matter as I was to find it being referred to in a noir mystery. One might dismiss it as merely a topical reference were it not for Macdonald’s having Archer display a bit of psychological sophistication.

Archer observes of three separate characters that they lack the kind of centered groundedness that is the mark of psychological health and maturity. The first is an artsy New York playwright and poet come West. When he first meets him, Archer remarks, “Everything he said and did was so stylized that I couldn’t get at his center, or even guess where it was” (37). He makes a similar observation of another character: “Reavis had quantities of raw charm. But underneath it there was something lacking. I could talk to him all night and never find his core, because he had never found it” (59). He comments on a third character: “Her insecurity went further back than the letter she had given me. Some guilt or fear was drawing her backward steadily, so that she had to enthuse and emote and be admired in order to stay in the same place” (38). Recognizing personality defects and commenting on them in this manner is emblematic of psychological subtlety and makes me think that Macdonald had more than the artist’s insight into human character, that he had read in the field or perhaps even himself had been in analysis. Archer even mentions the Oedipus complex and the Elektra complex.

In addition to psychological allusions, Macdonald makes reference to Shakespeare, Coleridge, Proust, and Dylan Thomas. And possibly to Andrew Marvell. I say *possibly*, because the playwright/poet in the novel is named Marvell; and when Archer asks about him, he is told: “He’s an English poet. He went to Oxford, and his uncle’s a lord” (30). The reader familiar with English poetry but not grounded in the Metaphysicals might just think that Chandler has named him after Andrew Marvell. After all, it could be said of either Marvell that “he’s an English poet.” So I investigated and found that Andrew Marvell went to Cambridge, not Oxford, and that his father was an Anglican clergyman, making it unlikely that his uncle was a lord. I found no reference to a titled uncle. There is no direct correlation here between the poet and the character, and I don’t want to make more of it than is warranted. I wouldn’t even mention it, if it were not for the several other allusions Macdonald makes to literary figures. Perhaps, as the English say, he’s having us on with this name and the ambiguity.

The references to Proust and Dylan Thomas are quick and casual. When Archer learns the identity of Marvell, the playwright and poet in the story, he is also told that his poetry is “awfully difficult and symbolic, like Dylan Thomas” (30). The passage is just ambiguous enough that when Archer thinks to himself, “the name rang no bell,” we’re not sure which name he means, *Marvell* or *Thomas*. Later, a woman tells Archer that her husband has retired to his bedroom and “claims that he’ll spend the rest of his life in his room, like Marcel Proust” (157). Clearly, Macdonald knows the names, even if Archer doesn’t. Again, we sense that he’s having fun with us.

There is no question of Macdonald's intent with the reference to Coleridge, however; for Archer is asked by a young woman, "Did you ever read his 'Ode to Dejection'?" (238). When Coleridge wrote the ode, he was facing the loss of everything he held dear: happiness in love, health, and most importantly, his creative vitality. Archer's interlocutor, who is really still a child, makes the reference after learning of the terrible mistakes she has made already in her short life. She has sided with the man she mistakenly thought to be her father in a complicated family feud and, acting for him in the dispute, has killed her grandmother. The murder is intended to hurt her mother as well, and, of course, it does; the mother, having now realized her own mistake in marrying the wrong man, commits suicide. As everything is revealed to the girl, she realizes the horror of her mistakes. Not only has she lost those she should have held most dear, but she is responsible for those losses. Her life stretches before her with little promise of peace or happiness. "Dejection: An Ode" seems particularly appropriate to her situation. She concludes: "Coleridge was right about nature, I guess. You see the beauty there if you have it in your heart. If your heart is desolate, the world is a wilderness" (238). Indeed, her desolate heart beholds nothing but a wilderness.

My favorite of these literary references is an indirect one to Shakespeare. Archer had left the police force because he saw too many signs of corruption. Here, he is talking with a friend about police corruption, and the friend says, of a third party, "Ralph is honest. He's been a policeman all his life, but he still has a decent conscience" (156). To which, Archer quips in reply, "Two of them, probably. Most

good policemen have a public conscience and a private conscience. I just have the private conscience; a poor thing, but my own.” I thought I recognized that last phrase, and a little research turned up the interesting fact that this is a frequent misquotation from Shakespeare. It appears in many permutations similar to Archer’s phrasing; but in fact, the actual line is the clown’s in *As You Like It*, where Touchstone says, “A poor virgin, sir, an ill-favor’d thing, sir, but mine own” (AYL 5.4.58-59).

Finding such literate allusions certainly lifts Macdonald in my estimation; but however much I am impressed by his being the best of these three writers, I am not impelled to continue reading the Lew Archer series. And one measure that I use to judge an author is that very desire (or lack of it) to read further in his work.

* * * * *

Dashiell Hammett is touted as one of the great mystery writers, and Sam Spade is an established figure in our culture. Philip Marlowe and Lew Archer have similarly iconic places in the pantheon of noir and hard-boiled detectives; yet none of them draws me in or makes me want to spend more time with him. I like Archer more than Marlowe, Marlowe more than Spade; that is to say, I like Macdonald’s writing more than Chandler’s and Chandler’s more than Hammett’s. If I am not drawn to Macdonald’s Lew Archer series, I would be even less likely to read Chandler’s Philip Marlowe series, even having read Parker’s contributions—especially then: Parker improves Chandler. And I’m positively glad that Sam Spade appears in only the one novel. No temptation there.

I chose to read these three novels because of their reputation in noir fiction, because I had attached a negative valence to them without actually having read them, and because I wanted to determine whether that valuation had any validity or was merely the result of some misguided prejudice. It was obviously a pre-judgment, but now I know it wasn't misguided.

I am reminded of another case of prejudgment, which also turned out to have been correct. I met Randy Wayne White at a book signing and was talking with him after the hubbub had died down. At one point he compared himself unfavorably to Ross Macdonald, and I replied that he was much better than Macdonald. As I have indicated here, I had never read Ross Macdonald; but when I was speaking to Randy White, I was confusing Ross Macdonald with John D. MacDonald, the author of the Travis McGee series of pulp detective fiction. Having read a couple of Travis McGee novels years ago, I was correct when I said that White was much better than MacDonald (John D.), but my statement was meaningless, at the time, with regard to Ross Macdonald. I later realized my mistake and was a bit chagrined. That mistake also contributed to my wanting to include the latter in this investigation. What was this Macdonald's writing like? I had I made an error, but perhaps it wasn't inaccurate. This essay helped me find out. I'm through with Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, and Lew Archer, but I'm still reading Randy Wayne White and wanting to spend time with "Doc" Ford. Maybe I'll pick up *Tampa Burn* and start reading right now.

Afterword

Can one write an afterword to an essay? Apparently so. I was dogged midway through writing this essay by the thought that perhaps Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer should be included in this investigation. He's certainly well-known and as hard-boiled as they come, so I looked into it. I thought that *I, The Jury* was probably his best known, so I went to our local library, where I found it in a single-volume trilogy with *My Gun Is Quick* and *Vengeance Is Mine*. The introduction by Max Allan Collins, a big fan of Spillane's, made me want to read all three, so I read the first chapter of each, hoping that that stratagem would help me decide which of the three to read. Unfortunately, it led only to my not wanting to read any of them. I found not even one example of the kind of thing that makes me want to read. The language had a certain kind of power, something like a sharp punch to the midsection, but nothing that aimed at my heart. It was pure pulp. The plots would have led me into any of the three, had I wanted simply to find out what happened, but that is no longer of much interest to me. I read now because I enjoy the specialness of the language or because I find characters that I want to spend time with. I found neither in Spillane.

The Defective Detective

The conscience of a blackened street
 Impatient to assume the world.
 I am moved by fancies that are curled
 Around these images, and cling:
 The notion of some infinitely gentle
 Infinitely suffering thing.
 —T. S. Eliot, “Preludes”

My favorite detectives are damaged or broken people. Well, my *favorite* is actually a paragon, but that’s another story. I should say that most of my favorites are either social misfits or people plagued by psychological injury. I first noticed this preference of mine in the alcoholic detectives of Lawrence Block and James Lee Burke: Matt Scudder and Dave Robicheaux, respectively. Both had been recommended to me by a fellow reading-friend while I was still into thrillers, and I have to credit him with bringing me to detective fiction.

There are many ways that characters can be “damaged.” They need not have the nearly debilitating alcoholism of Scudder or Robicheaux. The “injury” may be as simple as having a deaf wife, as does Steve Carella from Ed McBain’s 87th Precinct novels, or being a widower, as is Lt. Joe Leaphorn of Tony Hillerman’s Navajo Tribal Police. These two suffer a deep pain, but it does not interfere with their careers. Actually, none of the damage suffered by any of these detectives interferes with their work. One might even speculate that it is part of what drives them to be good at what they do professionally. Even Carella’s personal life is unaffected, and the couple is blessed with children and a happy home. Leaphorn suffers the loneliness of loss in later life and neither wants to nor can commit himself to another woman. One comes

into his life, but they remain only friends, even as she makes overtures towards becoming more.

Some modern detectives have difficulty with intimacy and the opposite sex. Patricia Cornwell's criminal pathologist, Dr. Kay Scarpetta, cannot seem to find a man she can commit to, nor can Kinsey Milhone from Sue Grafton's "alphabetical" series. Likewise, Randy Wayne White's "Doc" Ford, who lives alone in a stilt house in the Florida keys doing marine biological research and tying flies. Sgt. Jim Chee, who works with Joe Leaphorn, loves a Navajo lawyer who seeks the excitement of life in Washington while Jim is a traditional Navajo who loves the reservation and trains to become a tribal singer or medicine man. Although he is a middle-aged police chief in New Hampshire, Joe Gunther has problems similar to Chee's. He, too, is a quiet loner who loves an activist lawyer, but neither he nor Gail can quite change enough to make the relationship work.

A fictional detective need not be "damaged goods." Robert B. Parker's Spenser, that paragon I have mentioned, and his Sunny Randall are relatively well-adjusted and happy in both their personal lives and their careers. So, too, is Sara Paretsky's V. I. Warshawski. But the protagonist whose personality is rough around the edges can provide an author with material to enrich a novel and take it beyond simple detection, mystery, or thrills. Such personality development adds the human element that is at the heart of all good fiction—indeed, of all art. In the case of detective fiction, the foibles of the detective may serve another purpose as well. Charles Rzepka suggests that they may link the modern detective to the hero of

romance, the lone knight on his noble quest (180).

In the Shakespeare classroom, one may hear the quip: What is the difference between tragedy and comedy? The reply—tragedy ends with a funeral, comedy with a wedding—contains a certain amount of truth: most of Shakespeare's tragedies, and those of many other dramatists, end with one or more people dying or being killed, and their comedies frequently end with a marriage. In a comedy, the complicating trouble is generally social, often familial, sometimes humorous, and frequently dependent upon misinformation. By the end of the play, however, harmony has been restored to a worthy and respectable society, often including restitution or reparation.

The classical detective story—Agatha Christie is probably the queen of the type—is essentially a comedy. Disorder erupts in a closed society (which represents the greater social cosmos of which it is a part); the detective enters, solves the crime, and order is restored. Christie's stories even end occasionally with an engagement or a wedding, conforming to the jest.

Even in those stories that conform to such a model, however, the disruption is more severe than in the traditional comedy. Since murder is the most common cause of the disorder, the narrative, instead of ending with a funeral, usually begins with one (a juxtaposition that introduces overtones of tragedy into the comedy).

Reparation is obviously not possible, but there is restitution of order and some retribution for the society in the form of punishment for the offender(s).

Charles Rzepka believes that the hard-boiled detective story, in contrast to the classical one, is a romance rather than a comedy.

The traditional romance unfolds in a world on the verge of disintegration, as in the Arthurian legends and medieval tales of knight-errantry. This is a world polluted by self-interest and full of challenges and snares, in which no one is to be trusted and all must be tested. The hero, a lone knight, seeks not to redeem this fallen society, but to maintain his personal integrity in the face of repeated temptations and deceptions. (180)

Rzepka locates the focus of the hard-boiled detective story in the character of the detective himself, rather than in the social order in which the detection takes place. While he may not be attempting to redeem a fallen society, I would emphasize that the detective is still almost always attempting to restore some semblance of order to that society, however tainted it may be and however arduous his own personal trials prove. The hard-boiled detective moves the structure of the novel away from comedy toward romance even as it maintains its foundation in a social order in need of redemption.

As I thought about the authors that I read, I could see that many of their characters fit this model of a romance hero contending with external dragons and/or internal demons while restoring order to a fallen society. I also became aware that those internal demons were manifestations of a basic personality flaw that gives these detectives the engaging twist that drives my interest in these novels beyond mere plot.

I have chosen to discuss several of these characters who display a range of personal “defects,” from an atypical, suave and charming burglar to the more typical,

alcoholic ex-cop; and I present them in the order of the increasing intensity of their personal self-destructiveness and their creators' powerful and evocative writing.

Although not exactly damaged, the first two are, in their own ways, not fully functioning or fully integrated adult members of society. Lawrence Block's Bernie Rhodenbarr and Jerome Doolittle's Tom Bethany are as much law-breakers as defenders of justice, but it is their law-abiding side that ultimately predominates. Their personalities and extra-legal activities spice up the pot, adding a dash of delicate and dangerous seasoning that appeals to the taste of many readers. I suspect that this aspect of these series is the hook that publishers are always looking for. Bernie is an outright thief, and Bethany skirts society and some of its conventions, necessary and otherwise.

* * * * *

Lawrence Block's Bernie Rhodenbarr

One might quibble with calling a thief a detective, but the people I know who read the Bernie Rhodenbarr series seem to get a kick out of his being a burglar, flaunting the law, and boasting of it throughout. Bernie gives us a peek into his past in *The Burglar Who Studied Spinoza*, letting us know that burglary is just his way of life: "I was an old hand at this sort of thing, I'd grown up letting myself into other people's houses." This may give his larceny an historical precedent, but it is not the real reason he steals. He continues: "the edgy anxious thrill had not worn off. I have a hunch it never will" (26). Then, having successfully picked the locks on a victim's

door, Bernie exclaims, “I opened the door and Lord, what a feeling!” (30). It’s for the thrill! Clearly, this is a case of arrested development, the adolescent still flirting with being caught by parental authority figures. Again, he tries to justify what he does:

I’m grateful there isn’t something even more despicable than burglary that gives me that feeling, because if there were I probably wouldn’t be able to resist it. [. . .] God knows I’m not proud of it. I’d think far more highly of myself if I eked out a living at [some respectable job]. [. . .] I don’t shoot crap or snort coke or zoom around with the Beautiful People. Nor do I consort with known criminals, as the parole board so charmingly phrases it. I don’t like criminals. I don’t like being one myself.

But I love to steal. Go figure. (30)

I figure that he has just demonstrated one of the cardinal characteristics of the sociopathic personality: being comfortable with blatant contradictions, especially when justifying his behavior. Even if his illicit behavior would warrant such a diagnosis, the lack of malice mitigates in his favor and allows his fans to revel vicariously in his anti-social antics.

This duplicity carries over into the plots, for while he is unashamedly a thief, he is repelled by violence and murder. Murder is the central crime in the books I have read from this series, and in each, Bernie comes unintentionally to the role of the detective who solves the crime. There is no altruistic motive behind his connection with the police, with whom he’d really rather not be involved. Rather he is “forced”

onto the side of law and order because his burglary pulls him incidentally into the situation. He is either deliberately framed for the murders or becomes the primary suspect because his larcenous activities have put his fingerprints at the scene. The only way he sees to clear his name is to solve the crime himself. Again, the sociopathic split occurs: he isn't doing the right but the expedient thing. He acts not out of moral consideration but out of blatant self-interest.

In *Spinoza*, his refined and friendly fence, Abel Crowe, reads from Spinoza a quotation that prescribes temperance for the wise man in various pleasures and activities that may be done “without injury to his fellows” (45). How perfectly appropriate for Bernie. For him, hurting someone means physical injury; he only vaguely and glibly considers the harm done by stealing from his fellows. The irony continues as they persist in discussing their own penchant for possessions, however ignobly obtained. Bernie shows him a rare coin he has stolen earlier that evening:

He sighed. “What do you want for this coin Bernard?”

“Wealth beyond the dreams of avarice.”

“A felicitous phrase. Your own?”

“Samuel Johnson said it first.”

“I thought it had a classic ring to it. Spinoza called avarice ‘nothing but a species of madness, although not enumerated among diseases.’” (49)

Bernie later quotes Dante: “Pride, Envy and Avarice are the three sparks that have set the hearts of all on fire. From the sixth Canto of [the] *Inferno*” (65). Avarice again,

ironically. The quotation from Johnson also appears in *The Burglar Who Liked to Quote Kipling*. All this advice against avarice from classic authors, whom these characters enjoy being able to quote, is undoubtedly done by Block with tongue in cheek. The irony is clear; but the tone seems to invite the reader to endorse their facile flaunting of the advice of the sages they quote so freely.

This arch conversation is conducted in the cultured and civilized atmosphere of Abel's well appointed apartment. Crowe is a sweet old man from "Mittel Europa" who worries about Bernie when he is on a job and who has him up afterwards for Scotch or an espresso with fresh whipped cream and perhaps one of several "decadently rich pastries" (44), while they listen to Haydn or Vivaldi and discuss the evening's take. Later he brings out the aged—and expensive—cognac. Abel had spent much of the Second World War in a concentration camp, so we are, of course, immediately made to feel compassion and sympathy for him. How can we be other than lenient with larceny when we know how much he must have suffered at the hands of real demons? He has earned his ease in this apartment, "richly paneled in dark woods and lined with bookshelves [looking] westward over Riverside Park to New Jersey" (42). This is in a fully serviced apartment building, with double layers of protection, including doormen, elevator operators, and multiple locks on doors. The security is necessary because "fences are natural targets for thieves. You'd think that they'd be off-limits, that criminals would forbear to bite the hands that feed them, but it doesn't work that way" (42). Of course not; they're criminals! Note the double layer of irony here. Abel is not only a likely target for the very people he helps

(excluding Bernie, of course), but he lives in a veritable prison, this veteran of the camps.

I admit that Bernie is sophisticated, elegant, witty, and charming. He quotes Dante and Samuel Johnson, he drinks Armagnac (the only true rival to Cognac, according to Abel), he listens to Haydn and Vivaldi. No wonder he appeals to so many people. Snob appeal. One might do well to recall, however, that those adjectives—sophisticated, elegant, witty, and charming—describe most con men. Readers may be drawn into these capers just as people are drawn into various confidence schemes. Furthermore, Bernie is conscientious and considerate: he doesn't create a mess when he's stealing from someone's house or apartment; he relocks all the locks he has opened, leaving all as he has found it—minus what he steals, of course. He even fills the tank of a car he repeatedly steals throughout *Kipling*. He leaves all the elegant and lavish things that he carefully enumerates for us during a robbery, the objets d'art, the silver, the crystal, the collectibles, focusing only on the single item he has come for, a rare book in *Kipling*, a rare coin in *Spinoza*. Well, he just can't resist the emerald earrings and the Patek Philippe watch when he is searching for the coin. A man can't always be scrupulous. And, of course, he always takes loose cash. One has expenses in any profession, you see.

Another appeal of the series is the titles. They are arresting; they beg to be picked up; they entice us to read. Who can resist appellations such as *The Burglar Who Painted Like Mondrian*, *The Burglar Who Traded Ted Williams*, *The Burglar Who Thought He Was Bogart*, *The Burglar in the Rye*? I first picked up *Kipling* (to

an English teacher the title is irresistible), but I wasn't drawn to Bernie, in spite of his cosmopolitan charm. Indeed, there is an arch tone in the novels that puts me off somewhat. I later tried *Spinoza*, again drawn in by the title, hoping that I had been too harsh in my first assessment. Indeed, I was pulled into the plot, caught in it just as Bernie was caught. Shall we call it the "whodunit factor"? Block does a good job of getting me wondering what will happen next, but the real problem comes in the dénouement.

There are two major flaws in this series. Bernie discovers things that he doesn't disclose to the reader. He tells us he has answers to questions, but he doesn't say what they are until everything is in place for his dramatic revelation. This is not an unusual device in detective fiction; and if that were the only flaw, I probably wouldn't quibble. But the disclosure comes in a pat ending, complete with assembled cast, including the obligatory and obliging police detective (who, we should note, is not above taking a bribe, thus aligning himself morally with Bernie), explaining the whole thing and exposing the culprit, who sits cool and detached, then grows more and more uncomfortable until he blusters first a denial, then accusations, and finally a confession. This could have been Hercule Poirot, showing us the results of the little grey cells at work, or Miss Marple in her sly and self-effacing way wrapping it all up in a nice little package. It is also unsettling that in these set-piece endings, Bernie reveals his burglary, to which no one objects, not even the police. He is the forgiven felon, having exposed the murderer.

This sort of outcome puts these novels in the camp of the classic detective

comedies mentioned earlier, especially with their semblance to the mysteries of Agatha Christie; but Bernie does have in common with the more hard-boiled detectives his imperfect personality. In his case, it is his criminal calling, a manifestation of sociopathy. From the perspective of proper and respectable social behavior, it seems fair to consider him a defective detective, even though he is not an exemplar of the hero seeking “to maintain his personal integrity in the face of repeated temptations and deceptions.” He perpetually perpetrates deceptions and constantly capitulates to the temptations that appeal to him. He is, on the one hand, an anti-hero to the romance sort and more a comic hero. On the other hand, the fact of his lawlessness is a deficiency, and that does place him with the defective detectives.

Block seems to write for two separate audiences. In his other series, Matthew Scudder is a hard-drinking, hard-boiled detective who lives and works among the dregs of urban America and who appeals to one kind of reader. Bernie Rhodenbarr may be written for the other kind of mystery reader, the one who likes the so-called cozy mystery, of which Agatha Christie is the quintessential example. I revere Agatha Christie for her place in the pantheon of mystery writers, but I do not like to read her.

Additionally, Bernie Rhodenbarr is a sociopath, the most common personality-type among criminals. Perhaps, part of my problem with Bernie is having worked, as a psychologist, with too many sociopathic people to be comfortable with them or to enjoy them, no matter how entertaining and charming. I don't think that

it's simply that I am too strait-laced, and I hope I don't sound sanctimonious. I am not so morally rigid as to be unable to appreciate a roguish character (I love Tom Bethany), and I get the joke. I just don't think it's very funny.

* * * * *

Jerome Doolittle's Tom Bethany

The other social misfit is Jerome Doolittle's Tom Bethany, who is neither a thief nor a private detective. He does engage in investigation but in an off-hand way and definitely off-the-record. In fact, his whole life is off-the-record. His detection comes about when he is called upon by a friend or acquaintance who needs help that requires his skills, which often seem as much like academic research as actual investigation. Sometimes he acts in an unofficial and unauthorized consulting capacity to the ACLU, for whom a close friend works.

She is married, and they are in a committed, long-term love affair. She lives in Washington, Tom in Boston. Her work for the ACLU makes occasional trips to Boston not only convenient but necessary. Tom and Hope are discreet—in deference to her husband's feelings. He seems to know of the affair and apparently approves in silence; the three of them even have dinner together occasionally, the couple playing married hosts to Bethany's bachelor guest. No one speaks of the actual pairings. The trick in this twisted triad is that the husband is gay, something he discovers only after he and Hope have had two children. They stay together for two reasons: primarily for the sake of the children, but they also happen to like one another. She accepts his

homosexuality—he too is discreet, in deference to *her* feelings—and they have active and satisfying professional, social, and family lives. Only their sexual lives have to be fulfilled outside the marriage. This unconventional arrangement works well for all three parties.

The ACLU often has a need for a discreet investigator, and Hope calls on Bethany, sometimes in an informal capacity and sometimes as a paid consultant, as in *Body Scissors*, where he is paid by the hour plus expenses, just as if he were a real investigator. In *Strangle Hold*, however, he accepts only one dollar from an attorney associated with the ACLU. That way he and the attorney are both bound by professional confidentiality, and he is, in effect, donating his services and contributing to the association's liberal cause. Presumably, his occasional pecuniary compensations are enough to keep him in his frugal lifestyle.

Tom has an apartment, where he sleeps when Hope is not in town. When she is, he stays in her hotel room. He has no phone and only a post-office box for mail. For an office, he uses “Harvard Square when the weather [is] good and a Harvard Square coffee shop called The Tasty, when it [isn't]” (*Strangle Hold* 67). He gives out that telephone number, and Joey Neary, the counterman, takes calls and messages for him. He tells some people that they can also reach him by dropping in on the place. In exchange for getting these “office services” at The Tasty, he lets Joey have his car whenever he's not using it, which is most of the time. For moving around the city, he usually uses the T, Boston's public transportation system. “Its prices [are] low enough to keep out the riffraff, like the people who [work] in the big offices on

Hanover Street” (*Strangle Hold* 48).

The proximity of his “offices” to Harvard is no accident, for Bethany learned soon after coming to Boston that a Harvard education was not nearly as difficult or expensive as most people think. “It’s easy enough to get into the lectures and the library, and what else is there about a university that matters?” (*Body Scissors* 96). He not only participates in the Harvard academic program by attending classes, unofficially auditing: he is also part of its sports program. He befriends a graduate assistant with the wrestling team, who gets him an entry pass to the gym and lets him help out with team practices, in which he acts as an assistant coach. Working out with the Harvard wrestling team also allows him to stay in shape and keep his wrestling skills sharp, an ability that proves immensely useful when he gets into close quarters with villains who mean him bodily harm. No James Bondian gadgetry to provide a *deus-ex-machina* escape from peril for Tom Bethany. His quickness, agility, and wrestling maneuvers allow him to escape from or overpower any nemesis, with no slight to our credulity.

Bethany had been a champion-level wrestler in high school, and he returned to the sport when he later went to college, having been to Southeast Asia in the interim with unfortunate results. Returning from the Vietnam War, he “went through a long black patch” (*Body Scissors* 93). He married, fathered a daughter, went to Alaska as a bush pilot, spent several years as a drunk, was divorced, and ended up broke, wrestling on a pool table with a drunk bully in an Anchorage saloon. Vomiting all over the other fellow and the pool table brought a certain clarity to his life: he saw its

putrescence for what it was. The next day, he saw through the haze of hangover the “unarguable proof that [he] had turned soft and fat: a two-minute workout had taken [his] strength away.” He recalls:

I might still make an impressive show for the ignorant, tying up nonwrestlers in a few explosive seconds. But any of a dozen wrestlers I had beaten in my high school days would no longer have any trouble with me. Furthermore, I had lost my wife and my daughter long since. And I had lost my last two jobs because of unreliability and sloppy flying. (*Body Scissors* 94)

Bethany returns to the continental U.S. and enrolls at the University of Iowa, where a sympathetic wrestling coach helps him regain his sanity and focus as well as his wrestling proficiency. He becomes good enough, in fact, to qualify for the 1980 U.S. Olympic team. “Five years of daily discipline and self-punishment, never letting go, never slowing down or even coasting, always whipping the shrieking machinery past old breaking points, on toward new ones [with] only one goal left” (*Body Scissors* 95). Then Jimmy Carter cancels U.S. participation in the 1980 Moscow games. Tom is never doctrinaire about his allegiances, but Carter’s futile and ineffective political plan, which Bethany calls “a schoolboy gesture,” turns his previously liberal political enthusiasm against the entire establishment. He cannot help but sustain some sympathy for liberal causes, as we see in his working for the ACLU; but he is as quick to criticize the left as the right. He remains liberal in his social attitudes, but he becomes a political anchorite.

He consciously drops out of society. The old Tom Bethany had been, on paper, a normal person from the date of his birth “until 1980. School records, army records, Air America employment records, GI bill, social security income tax at a very modest level, pilot’s license, marriage license, divorce papers, a few stories on the sports pages” (*Body Scissors* 93). Then he virtually ceases to exist—for the government bureaucracy, that is. He just falls off the radar, as they say. “Now I’m like the Stealth bomber, invisible to radar. Actually neither one of us is really invisible, probably, but at least you’d have to be looking pretty hard to spot us on the screen” (*Strangle Hold* 88). Those various documents remain in their respective files, but nothing is ever added to them. Bethany has his phone disconnected and moves out of his apartment, leaving no forwarding address. He pays off his credit cards and never uses them again. They expire, as does his driver’s license. He sells his car and cancels his insurance. In effect, he disappears from sight of the economic and governmental forces that drive and monitor society. Unusual, though not illegal, but for one thing: he never files or pays personal income tax. That is his only real crime.

Tom does occasionally go where he does not belong, as when he finds it expedient to enter the house of a person that he is investigating while the family is not at home. Unlike Bernie and Kinsey Milhone (below), he feels considerable trepidation about his trespass. “In theory [. . .], I knew perfectly well that most burglars don’t get caught” (*Body Scissors* 178), but he imagines how unseen neighbors might wonder what his unfamiliar presence meant, how the people next door might see him, how dogs could be aware of his unfamiliar odor. Any of these

might trigger an alarm and bring him to bay at the hands of the police, whom he has worked so hard to make unaware even of his existence, let alone his illicit appearance in this place. Once inside, a crash of music teaches him “that fight or flight aren’t the only two options when danger explodes in the hunter-gatherer’s face. He can also stand paralyzed, which was the choice [his] system made” (*Body Scissors* 179). It turns into a comic moment when the family cat strolls unhurriedly into the room. The cat had leapt onto the piano keys and produced his paralysis by cacophony. He returns, chagrined, to felonious activity.

His intrusion into the house is not for illicit purposes, however, even though the entry itself is illegal. He steals nothing, bothers nothing. He needs the cover of night to get in, but he requires the light of day to snoop around; he doesn’t want to arouse neighborly suspicion by turning on lights when the family is spending the weekend at Cape Cod. So he spends the night there, having breakfast and considerately tidying up after himself the next morning, concealing any evidence of his having been there. This particular behavior is reminiscent of Bernie Rhodenbarr’s, but Bethany’s stealth has a legitimate intent even if it is not, in itself, a legitimate activity.

In fact, none of Tom’s activities are intentionally felonious, except his avoiding taxes. He is quite candid about his faults, readily admitting the childishness of much of his behavior, and he never lets himself off the hook when criticizing others. A friend’s drinking himself into a stupor offers Bethany the chance to condemn, but he remembers too well his own past: “I took him home staggering

drunk and his wife never forgave me. She figured I was a bad influence on [him]. I knew about that. I had a wife once, too, and back then I was a drunk like [him]. My wife always blamed *my* friends too” (*Body Scissors* 85).

He is against the establishment, against the system, but he is always for the human.

Not paying taxes seems a petulant snit in what can be called his perpetual adolescence, but we cannot help but feel some admiration and envy for his acting on what most Americans dream of doing in their less considered moments: thumbing their noses at the government, refusing to pay taxes, and abdicating adult responsibility in exchange for glorious, puerile isolation and freedom.

Bethany’s extra-legal activities, expressions of some arrested attitudes of adolescence, place him in the company of other defective detectives. In his postwar experience, he suffers the debilitating erosion of his character in alcoholism, something he shares with many of these detectives, and fails as a husband and father; then he put himself back together to function more fully and effectively, but not so completely that we don’t recognize his antiestablishmentarianism as a limp in his walk through the rest of his life, his stride slightly askew.

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Sue Grafton’s Kinsey Milhone

Sue Grafton has set herself an interesting task: writing a series of mysteries, one each year, that uses the alphabet as a progressive device for the titles: “A” *Is for Alibi*, “B” *Is for Burglar*, “C” *Is for Corpse*, and so forth. I have had some doubts

whether she could sustain the series over twenty-six years, but with the publication of "*S*" *Is for Silence* this year, I think she will probably make it.

Clever as they are, the draw for the series is not the titles but her main character, Kinsey Milhone, a single, twice-divorced, childless, spunky, cynical, petite, moderately feminist detective, who is slightly "bent" (her word). At times, her bent is more like that of the criminal's than the law abider's. For instance, she has a set of lock picks, tools used only by thieves (and locksmiths). And her attitude toward the truth would win her no civic citations: "In my quest for information, I was going to have to use ingenuity, which is to say the usual lies and deceit" ("L" 103). She deviates enough from the norm of socialized behavior to qualify her easily for the group that I'm looking at; but though her peculiarities may set her apart from the social norm, she is basically ethical and honest at heart. This fundamental goodness, along with her chosen profession, keeps her working to restore the social fabric when it has been torn by some criminal act.

One of her defects she shares with Bernie Rhodenbarr, a love of the thrill of being where she doesn't belong:

So far the coast was clear. My tension had passed, and I suddenly realized I was enjoying myself. I suppressed a quick laugh, doing a little dance step in my tennis shoes. I love this stuff. I was born to snoop. Nothing's as exhilarating as a night of breaking and entering. I turned back to the task, fairly humming with happiness. If I didn't work in behalf of law enforcement, I'd be in jail, I'm sure.

(“*J*” 25)

But she’s a snoop, not a thief; and her behavior is mischievous rather than felonious. It is a misplaced manifestation of her profession. Bernie is a miscreant who happens into bringing about justice or rebalancing the social order. Tom Bethany is a grown adolescent loner thumbing his nose at the establishment even as he rights wrongs done to the established order. Kinsey is devoted to maintaining the social order, even if she is something of a scamp; and she consciously and conscientiously works towards keeping it in balance. But she is, after all, a detective, and what detectives do is look into things: they investigate, they pry, they snoop.

Most investigators have been trained to investigate. That’s what we do best, even when we don’t feel enthusiastic about the task at hand.

Give us a room and ten minutes alone and we can’t help but snoop, poking automatically into other people’s business. Minding one’s own business isn’t half the fun. My notion of heaven is being accidentally locked in the Hall of Records overnight. (“*L*” 19)

Those last words might remind us of Bernie, but the tone is different. Bernie’s burglary smacks of smug self-satisfaction, while Kinsey’s tone is impish. She even does a little dance in her tennis shoes, “fairly humming with happiness.” She’s a rascal, not a robber; a rascal, not a robber.

Her predilection for prying is not what really marks her as a defective detective, however; it is rather her stubborn and misanthropic introversion. She is a loner and proud of it. She has only two friends. She claims as her closest friend

Vera Lipton, a claims adjuster for an insurance company where Kinsey once had an office, doing investigative work for the company in exchange for the office space. “She’s probably as close to a best friend as I’ll ever have, though I don’t really know what such a relationship entails” (“*J*” 106). Indeed. She never had the bosom “best friend” of youth with whom one shares the intimate secrets of the heart. How could she know what such a relationship entails? Even now, the confidences she shares with Vera generally have more to do with the cases she is on than with the private intimacies that best friends usually share.

Her other friend is Henry Pitts, a retired baker in his eighties and her landlord. He serves as an obvious father-surrogate who provides her with the ideal “bachelor pad,” his former garage that he has remodeled just for her and where she lives in splendid isolation. He also serves as a less-obvious mother-surrogate whose kitchen provides smells, sustenance, and succor. She reflects on their first encounter:

His kitchen window was open and the smells of yeast, cinnamon, and simmering spaghetti sauce wafted out across the sill into the mild spring air. [. . .] He invited me in, and while we talked, he fed me the first of the countless homemade cinnamon rolls I’ve consumed in his kitchen since. (“*K*” 17)

Their conversation over cinnamon rolls often comes closer to personal confidences than her lunches with Vera do.

A casual business acquaintance as best friend? The landlord as substitute for both mother and father? No wonder, then, when she says, “I’m not that good at

relationships. Get close to someone and next thing you know, you've given them the power to wound, betray, irritate, abandon, or bore you senseless. My general policy is to keep my distance, thus avoiding a lot of unruly emotion" ("*N*" 5). And we cannot be surprised that she has taken this stance toward life when we learn that both her parents had been killed in an automobile accident when she was five and that she had been reared by a maiden aunt, somewhat eccentric herself. "I was raised in accordance with her peculiar notions of what a girl-child should be. As a consequence, I turned out to be a somewhat odd human being, though not nearly as 'bent' as some people might think" ("*L*" 25).

They were on their way, she and her parents, to a weekend event with her mother's family. Her father was driving, and a large rock crashed through the windshield, killing him outright. Her mother was severely hurt and unable to move. Kinsey was wedged between the front and rear seats where she could hear her mother's "hopeless crying and the silence that came afterward" ("*J*" 117). She remembers "slipping a hand around the edge of the driver's seat, slipping a finger into [her] father's hand, not realizing he was dead." What a poignant picture! No wonder she has become so insular; she had to rely on her own inner resources as a five-year-old to cope with the most horrific of losses. And then to be reared by an aunt who was somewhat peculiar herself and who, while she provided reasonably well, never did and never could replace the maternal affection necessary to allow Kinsey to develop into a fully normal adult. No wonder that she cannot trust human relationships enough to put herself completely in another's charge. No wonder that

both marriages failed and that her attempts at intimacy with men continually founder.

Kinsey's outward attitude toward marriage and intimacy is what psychologists call a reaction formation, a conscious reaction *against* what we unconsciously desire. She often makes fun of marriage and motherhood. Dana, a wedding planner, has just complained about a client not getting back to her with the "cost-per-person breakdown of food and drink for the reception" that she has requested. Kinsey thinks:

I wondered if Dana ever told these young brides the problems they were going to run into once the wedding was over with: boredom, weight gain, irresponsibility, friction over sex, spending, family holidays, and who picks up the socks. Maybe it was just my basic cynicism rising to the surface, but cost-per-person food and drink breakdowns seemed trivial compared to the conflicts marriage generates. ("J" 93)

She makes fun of the traditional family and marriage because it is something she cannot allow herself to have. Naturally, when she reads about that kind of life in *Family Circle*, "it was like reading about life on an alien planet" ("K" 78).

Normalcy is that foreign to her. From the time she was five years old until she became an adult, she has had to accept not having the normal life.

Her basic cynicism is a way of protecting herself from that which she was once denied, the happy home. Her isolated way of life is a way of protecting herself from being hurt again. By choosing not to have the traditional life of marriage and

children, she protects herself from the possibility of losing it (again). When she is confronted on her unwillingness to become involved with her recently revealed extended family, she acknowledges as much: “I’ll admit I might have been a little crabby on the subject, but I couldn’t help myself. I’m thirty-five years old and my orphanhood suits me. Besides, when you’re ‘adopted’ at my age, how do you know they won’t become disillusioned and reject you again?” (“L” 25). Her declared desire to be a maverick actually covers the fear of rejection and loss, which she clearly admits at this point. Prior to this development in the series, she hasn’t even known she had an extended family. Having them suddenly appear in her life forces her to acknowledge that she fears rejection. Who wouldn’t in her place! But living adaptively with such fears requires defenses to keep the anxiety at bay. Hers are primarily denial and humor.

Kinsey professes a preference for her single life; but now and again, the underlying longings slip through, always accompanied by humor, which effectively negates the emotional impact that the sentiment carries:

I could smell somebody’s supper cooking, and the images were cozy. Once in a while I find myself at loose ends, and that’s when I feel the lack of a relationship. There’s something about love that brings a sense of focus to life. I wouldn’t complain about the sex, either, if I could remember how it went. I’d have to get out the instructor’s manual if I ever managed to get laid again. (“L” 68)

Shifting the focus away from the homey scene to sex actually reduces the intimacy

implied by her reflection. Then adding humor completely erases the feelings aroused. In another place, she describes a tender moment between a mother and her infant:

[Her] face lost its sullen cast and she greeted him in some privately generated mother tongue. He blew bubbles, flirting and drooling. When she picked him up, he buried his face against her shoulder, bunching his knees up in a squirm of happiness. It was the only moment in recorded history when I found myself wishing I had a critter like that. (“*J*” 137)

This is the first time that Kinsey has admitted that she would like to have a baby, but she distances herself (and us) from the idea by her diction and humor. Beginning the sentence with “It was the only moment in recorded history” sets it up as a joke. We’re already moving away from the moving moment just described. Additionally, the term *recorded history* carries a feeling of great compass, continuing to distance us, and—more importantly—her, from the scene. Finally, instead of the child being a cuddly, warm, loving baby, it’s a *critter*. It sounds more like a possum! Any yearning that she may have been admitting to has been effectively pushed away, and she is once again the clever cynic, snug in her cocoon of isolated independence.

We erect psychological defenses to protect ourselves from debilitating anxiety. When those defenses work well, we live reasonably happy and productive lives. I ache for Kinsey’s lost parental love and grieve at that haunting image of a five-year-old slipping her finger into her dead father’s hand and having to hear her mother’s hopeless cry become the silence of death. In spite of that horrifying

childhood trauma, she has developed into a sane and able adult, and we realize the inner strength that her personality possesses. But we also understand—perhaps even more than she does—how her chosen career compensates for the early loss that she suffered. Her prying into families’ lives in the course of criminal investigations is an expression of her wanting to understand and know more about something she never fully experienced. Her touchiness and sensitivity, her isolation and detachment, her distancing humor, are ways of protecting the inner self that was bereft of a family’s love and protection at such an early age. Her attempt to rectify things that have gone awry in the social order in her adult life is a way of attempting to put right those things that went so horribly wrong in her childhood life.

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Lawrence Block’s Matthew Scudder

Lawrence Block has two series of detective fiction. His Burglar series, which features Bernie Rhodenbarr as a suave and charming thief who happens to solve crimes worse than his own, has more in common with cozy mysteries than with the hard-boiled type; but his Matthew Scudder series is a quintessential representative of the latter.

Matt Scudder’s literary life covers more than three decades, having appeared in novels from 1976’s *The Sins of the Fathers* to the most recent *All the Flowers Are Dying*. He appeared in short stories even before that. At first, he isn’t a serious alcoholic—that is, an admitted one with potentially fatal blackouts. Rather, he’s

something of a happy drunk, not in the sense of being convivial and sociable, but in the sense of being contented with his life of drinking. “I sipped a little bourbon, drank a half inch of coffee, poured the rest of the bourbon into the cup. It’s a great way to get drunk without getting tired” (*Time to Murder* 51). But he is no poster boy for the alcoholic-beverage industry.

Scudder is a former cop who resigned from the force after an errant shot fired at a fleeing felon killed a child and left him filled with remorse. His marriage also failed, and he slipped into the life of a bachelor living in a hotel with the same ease that he slipped onto a bar stool for that cup of coffee laced with bourbon. He does not have a license to be a private detective, but friends send him people who are in need of his detecting skills. His failures as a policeman, husband, and father aside, he was a good police detective. Since he is not a licensed private detective, he doesn’t charge for his services; but he does accept gifts of gratitude for his help. Such monetary favors allow him to pay for his room and his liquor, which is about the extent of his life outside of these helpful escapades. He does occasionally send money to his ex-wife as a kind of child support for their one son, but he makes no effort to see her or to be otherwise involved in the boy’s life.

He also has a habit of stopping in at a random church and putting one tenth of these gifts in the alms box; but sometimes he just goes in to sit and think. He tells us, “I discovered churches not long after I left the force and moved away from Anita and the boys. I don’t know what it is about them, exactly. They are about the only place in New York where a person has room to think, but I’m not sure that’s their sole

attractions for me” (*Time to Murder* 45). He never explores that potential other attraction, but he does do a good deal of reflecting, in and out of churches—sitting a bar stool affords one considerable opportunity for philosophizing—and as the series progresses, his insight grows. It is no accident that the title of one novel, *Time to Murder and Create*, is borrowed from T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” a reflection on Prufrock’s own life as he obsesses about the decisions and indecisions that continue to confront him past middle age.

Scudder’s tithing has the same compulsive and unreflective quality that his drinking does, but in *Eight Million Ways to Die*, he challenges the compulsion. He walks into the church of St. Paul the Apostle and lights a candle for [a dead prostitute connected with a case he’s on] and begins to reflect on his habit of giving one tenth of what he earns to the church:

It occurred to me that I owed the church money. [. . .]

What was I doing anyway? Why did I figure I owed anybody money? And who did I owe it to? Not the church, I didn’t belong to any church. I gave my tithes to whatever house of worship came along at the right time.

To whom, then, was I in debt? To God?

Where was the sense in that? And what was the nature of this debt? How did I owe it? Was I repaying borrowed funds? Or had I invented some sort of bribe scheme, some celestial protection racket?

I’d never had trouble rationalizing it before [but] I’d never

really let myself ask myself why. [. . .]

After awhile I took out my wallet [and] sat there with the money in my hand. Then I put it all back in my wallet, all but a dollar.

At least I could pay for the candle. (211)

He continues in later novels to pay his tithe, but here for a moment he is free of the compulsive quality in this behavior. Compulsion is, of course, at the heart of any alcoholic's behavior. He may deny the craving by saying that he likes alcohol, that he wants to drink, and that he chooses to do so; or he may justify his drinking as a *need* to drink. But whatever his rationalization and whatever the cause—whether alcoholism is physical or psychological—the behavior is still compulsive.

Even though Matt regularly attends AA meetings, his attendance has the same rote, even compulsive, quality that his drinking does. He sits in the back, drinks coffee, maybe has a cookie, and listens to the qualifications (confessions and declarations) of others. Whenever it comes his turn to speak, his reply has the repetitious quality of a litany: “My name is Matt; I think I’ll pass tonight.” It is also evasive and equivocal. He may attend AA meetings, but he does not fully participate. He may admit to being an alcoholic, but the admission has the superficial quality of the would-be Christian who attends church only on Easter and Christmas Sundays. He is not quite ready to commit completely to a confession of his alcoholism. The final scene of the earlier novel, *Time to Murder and Create*, reveals the unreflective nature of his drinking and the way he, like many alcoholics, tries to diminish its hold on him with a shrug and a quip:

I went across the street to Armstrong's and had a plate of beans and sausage, then a drink and a cup of coffee. It was over now, it was all over, and I could drink normally again, never getting drunk, never staying entirely sober. I nodded at people now and then, and some of them nodded back to me. It was Saturday, so Trina was off, but Larry did just as good a job of bringing more coffee and bourbon when my cup was empty. (181)

It is interesting that in *Eight Million Ways to Die*, where he breaks free of his compulsive tithing, if only momentarily, he is forced finally to confront his alcoholism directly. He discovers, after a serious, three-day binge and blackout, that he is not actually in control of his drinking. The affair had begun with the typical alcoholic's rationalization:

A block further downtown I realized something. I'd been controlling my drinking for days now, and before that I'd been off the sauce entirely for over a week, and that proved something. Hell, if I could limit myself to two drinks a day, that was fairly strong evidence that I didn't *need* to limit myself to two drinks a day. [. . .]

I went into the saloon and ordered a double bourbon with water back. I remember the bartender had a shiny bald head, and I remember him pouring the drink, and I remember picking it up.

That's the last thing I remember. (69)

He wakes up in a hospital three days later, and then begins the slow and reluctant

process of facing up to the fact that he really is an alcoholic. That novel ends with him at an AA meeting, but the litany is suddenly broken:

Then it was my turn.

“My name is Matt,” I said, and paused, and started over. “My name is Matt,” I said, “and I’m an alcoholic.”

And the goddamnedest thing happened. I started to cry. (322)

He spends his time in successive novels talking and thinking about alcohol and drinking, going to AA meetings, and sometimes hanging out in bars, sometimes only noticing them as he walks by. The tedium is palpable but so is the obsessive determination not to drink, and we see and feel the struggle the alcoholic faces day after sober day, minute after sober minute.

He meets the challenge of his alcoholism—every day; but he still does not understand the self-destructiveness that underlies that condition and prevents him from being able to live a more fulfilling life, and it manifests itself in ways other than drinking. He has destroyed a career and a marriage and has failed as a father. He has only a few friends: a detective (“I went to him for favors, and returned them, sometimes in cash, sometimes in kind” [*All the Flowers* 2]); his AA sponsor, with whom he shares only his addiction and the periodic meeting or meal; and a couple of prostitutes. With the latter he is more than a professional client, since their relationships develop some personal intimacy beyond the sexual. One, Elaine, eventually becomes a virtual spousal partner, as she gives up “the life” and they grow close enough to live together.

Other than Elaine, the only person he really gets close to is a career criminal named Mick Ballou, who owns a saloon and runs a criminal operation involving alcohol, gambling, and usury. He, too, is a loner, and the two of them develop a curious but interesting friendship over the course of the later novels. That Matt would be drawn to him reinforces the idea that a quiet life in the suburbs is completely alien to him. Rather, he is drawn to the ethical razor's edge of life; and as the novels develop, his interpersonal life settles into a kind of unorthodox stability, living with Elaine and hanging out with Mick, while the world in which he is the center spirals downward into an ever-deepening moral morass.

Matt had slipped across the border of traditional integrity when he was on the police force. For example, in an early novel, he tells of having searched a dead man's body looking for his name: "No wallet, just a money clip in the shape of a dollar sign. Sterling silver, it looked like. He had a little over three hundred dollars. I put the ones and fives back into the clip and returned it to his pocket. I stuffed the rest into my own pocket. I had more of a use for it than he did (*Time to Murder* 140). And in the later *Everybody Dies*, talking with Mick, he admits to going further yet: "I bought favors, paying cops for information as if they were my snitches" (110). He has now begun to look more closely at what he has become, and ironically, he does his deepest soul searching in conversations with Mick. He reflects not just on the corruption of the system but on how he became corrupted by it:

I lost most of my illusions about the system during my years as a cop.
[. . .] You're essentially taught to break the rules. I learned to cut

corners, learned to stand up in court and lie under oath. I also took bribes and robbed the dead, but that was something else, that was more about the erosion of my own morals. It may have been job-related, but it didn't arise directly out of how I'd learned to regard the system.

It would be easy to blame the system for what he has become, but Matt does not use its immorality as an indulgent self-justification. Rather, he accepts that the erosion of morality was a part of who he has become, not simply something he learned from a corrupt environment. He finally comes to see himself clearly, a deeply flawed human being who has broken the most serious of societal and social law:

“I've deliberately subverted the law, and now and then I've taken it into my own hands. I've played judge and jury. Sometimes I guess I've played God.”

“You had a reason.”

“Everybody can always find a reason. The point is I've done illegal acts, and I've worked for and with criminals, but I've never thought of myself as a criminal.”

“Well, of course not. You're not a criminal.” (111)

In this conversation, Mick gives him a way to evade his moral malfeasance, but again he refuses the easy excuse and accepts responsibility. He is not a criminal, even though he may have behaved like one (like Mick, who is one). There is something that differentiates them; Mick recognizes it and verbalizes it: “You're not a criminal.” What sets them apart is what keeps civilization from reverting to the

savagery from which it arose. The criminal acts without regard to the rest of society; Matt's behavior may mimic the criminal's, but his motives are different. He never quite loses his mooring in society and is never free from the (healthy) doubt and guilt that must accompany immoral behavior for civilization to remain intact.

Nevertheless, Matt continues to inhabit that underworld where the acts themselves are clearly outside the pale.

Another conversation further distinguishes Matt from Mick, because Matt keeps his focus on intention as an important issue in the argument:

[Mick says], "You killed the man who killed your friend.
Good for you."

[Matt replies], "I don't know if it was good for me. It was much better for me than it was for him, I'll say that much. [. . .] I didn't consciously intend to kill him. When I walked in there and saw him I couldn't even manage to hate him. It'd be like hating a scorpion for stinging you. It's what they do, so what else can you expect from him?"

"Still, you'd grind that scorpion under your heel."

"Maybe that's not a good analogy. Or maybe it is, I don't know. But I wonder if I knew all along that I was going to kill him, and if I stage-managed things to give myself an excuse. Once he drew on me, I had permission. I wasn't murdering him, I wasn't executing him. It was self-defense." (254-55)

Matt questions his own motives; Mick simply takes action. Mick is a criminal; he engages in illegal and immoral activity without compunction. Matt accepts this kind of behavior in his friend: “It’s what they do.” But when he himself approaches that ethical boundary, he has to have good reason. Killing is not simply what he does. He cannot merely extract revenge for a friend having been killed; he has to be acting in self-defense—or at least acting with the appearance of self-defense.

Ironically, when Mick is virtually undone by rival criminals, he enlists Matt’s help in “bringing about justice.” His rivals have stolen his (stolen) goods, bombed and destroyed his saloon, turned his chief aide into a mole, and murdered the rest of his gang. He has only Matt to help him retaliate, and they do, completely wiping out the rival gang. The scene of the ensuing bloodbath underscores the ethical quagmire that this novel develops and into which Matt has fallen. To make himself less visible and susceptible to the offices of the law, Mick owns nothing in his own name, not even the saloon that was bombed. He has a place in upstate New York that is legally owned and operated by a farmer and his wife. It is a legitimate farm; they pay nothing to live there and keep the profits of their labor. The farmer doesn’t know precisely—and doesn’t want to know—what Mick does when he visits the place. They must suspect something, but they probably don’t want to recognize that he keeps the farm for the occasional disposal of dead bodies. The title of the novel is a nice double entendre with its philosophical overtone that expresses the obvious: everybody dies. In the story, everybody dies in the conflict between the two gangs. Only Mick remains. And Matt.

Matt Scudder is a complicated figure, with his alcoholism, his empty life of ennui, and his ethically dubious and constant crossing into the criminal world; and Mick, clearly a criminal, unrepentant and unapologetic, becomes something of an alter ego for him. Somewhat surprisingly, Mick reveals in this novel that he sometimes goes on retreats to a monastery, not for the religious life, of course, but merely for the protection, peace, and quiet it affords. The novel ends with his retiring there, apparently to finish out his life. Could this indicate that Matt has retired from his life of ethical uncertainty and failure? Probably not, since a postscript to the story finds him contacting Matt and disclosing that he has returned to rebuild his saloon and his previous life. If the leopard cannot change its spots, neither, apparently, can the criminal nor the ethically damaged soul.

Matthew masters his alcoholism and manages to mate with another damaged soul in Elaine and create some semblance of normalcy in their relationship; but in his friendship with Mick, he balances even more precariously than the alcoholic on the razor's edge of morality, because Mick represents the world of crime to which all cops are drawn like the proverbial moth to flame. The cop and criminal inhabit the same world; the cop merely maintains better control. He keeps a foot in the rational realm and works as a force for civilization. The alcoholic has lost control of his life, so an alcoholic cop cannot maintain that balance between evil and good. Hence, the alcoholic cop must leave the force, as do Matt and Dave Robicheaux.

Having conquered his alcoholism, Matt Scudder still finds himself drawn to the world of evil and consequently develops this curious friendship with Mick Ballou,

who at first is merely a representative of that illicit world. As their friendship grows, however, Matt is drawn to him even more deeply, and he becomes something of an alter ego. In *Everybody Dies*, they become a criminal coalition in a vendetta to destroy another outlaw band, and in that association Matt has virtually identified with Mick, psychologically and professionally. He has gone as far to “the dark side” as he can without overtly becoming a criminal.

* * * * *

James Lee Burke’s Dave Robicheaux

Dave Robicheaux never aligns himself with the criminal element as closely as Matthew Scudder does, but he does discover that his alcoholism masks an internal rage that drives him closer to self-destruction than even his alcoholism did. Like Scudder, he attends AA meetings regularly; but we never really see into the meetings, hear his participation, or get to know any of his sponsors. He has only a couple of slips in over a dozen novels, but drinking remains a constant temptation: “I had loved bars and bust-head whiskey with the adoration and simple trust of a man kneeling before a votive shrine. That kind of emotional faith and addiction dies no less easily than one’s religion” (*Flamingos* 133). He masters the alcoholism with the help of AA and regular attendance at their meetings but not without a good deal of self-determination and simple will power:

I had to remind myself I would be dead, in a mental institution, or putting together enough change and crumpled one-dollar bills in a

sunrise bar to buy a double shot of Beam, with a frosted schooner of Jax on the side, in the vain hope that somehow that shuddering rush of heat and amber light through my body would finally cook into ashes every snake and centipede writhing inside me. Then I would be sure that the red sun burning above the oaks in the parking lot would be less a threat to me, that the day would not be filled with metamorphic shapes and disembodied voices that were like slivers of wood in the mind, and that ten A.M. would not come in the form of shakes so bad that I couldn't hold a glass of whiskey with both hands. (*A Stained White Radiance* 16)

Even when he isn't drinking, Burke reveals clearly the intensity of Dave's continued craving for alcohol in powerful images. Here are two good examples, in which he declares that he "would have swallowed a razor blade for a shuddering rush of Jim Beam through my system" (*Heaven's Prisoners* 175) or been "willing to cut off my fingers one at a time with tin snips for the Scotch I had seen earlier" (*Crusader's Cross* 159).

Burke's powerful, descriptive writing about the alcoholic experience isn't limited to the first Robicheaux novel, *The Neon Rain*, but that is only one that directly shows us Dave continuously out of control and in the throes of alcoholic chaos. Later novels generally make oblique references like the ones just quoted; but in a flashback scene in a later novel to his first "lost weekend," he once again takes us into the excruciating experience of the alcoholic's return from stupor:

I woke before dawn, trembling all over, the distorted voices and faces of the people from the bar more real than the room around me. I couldn't remember how I had gotten back to the motel. Water was leaking through the ceiling, and a garbage can was tumbling end over end past the empty carport. I sat on the edge of my bed, my hands shaking, my throat so dry I couldn't swallow. [. . .] Inside the momentary white brilliance [of lightning] that lit the clouds and waves I thought I saw a green-black lake where the naked bodies of the damned were submerged to their chests, their mouths crying out to any who would hear.

I didn't know it at the time, but I had just booked my first passage on the *SS Delirium Tremens*. (*Crusader's Cross* 19)

As is so often the case, compulsive self-destructive behavior such as alcoholism often masks internal feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy (or lack of ego strength, in psychological jargon). Too often, the external behavior is thought to be the problem, but Burke explores the underlying causes and shows how they manifest themselves in other ways after the one kind of behavioral problem has been resolved. As the series develops, Dave reflects more and more on his feelings of inadequacy, his ongoing depression, and his vague sense of guilt.

Even as a young man, he begins to suffer the feelings that later lead to his drinking. He and Bootsie, his first love, share a youthful summer of lost virginity. Then he suddenly drops her, inexplicably, even to himself; and

Even though I was only twenty years old I began to experience bone-grinding periods of depression and guilt that seemed to have no legitimate cause or origin. When they came upon me, it was as though the sun had suddenly become a black cinder and had gone over the rim of the earth for the last time. I hurt her, pushed her away from me, wouldn't return her telephone calls or answer a poignant and self-blaming note she left on our front screen. Even today I'm hard put to explain my behavior. But I felt somehow that I was intrinsically bad, that anyone who could love me didn't now who I really was, and that eventually I would make that person bad, too. (*Flamingos* 73-74)

Ironically, he runs into Bootsie in a later novel when they are both entering middle age; and they renew their friendship and then their romance, eventually marrying, both for the second time. His first marriage ended tragically and violently when Annie was killed by thugs, shotgunned in their bed in which the gunmen supposed he also lay. Now, as if he were cursed by the gods like Oedipus and the House of Thebes, he discovers that Bootsie has lupus, a disease that saps the victim's vigor at various and unsuspected times, then lapses into periods of dormancy, only to strike again like a thug in the night. And he loses Bootsie, too.

If the romantic detective hero must "maintain his personal integrity in the face of repeated temptations and deceptions," Dave is faced with maintaining his personal integrity in the face of repeated assaults on his capacity to suffer and remain whole, this in a dependent personality ravaged by doubt, depression, and desperation:

I could hear the tiger pacing in his cage, his paws softly scudding on the wire mesh. His eyes were yellow in the darkness, his breath as fetid as meat that had rotted in the sun.

Sometimes I imagined him prowling through trees in William Blake's dark moral forest, his striped body electrified with a hungry light. But I knew that he was not the poet's creation; he was conceived and fed by my own self-destructive alcoholic energies and fears, chiefly my fear of mortality and my inability to affect the destiny of those whom I could not afford to lose. (*A Stained White Radiance* 75)

He is haunted by primeval images of prowling predators that are not only products of his unconscious feelings of helplessness and self-loathing but represent to his conscious mind an identity of himself as a primitive and savage being, feelings that earlier he sought to drown in alcohol:

The tannic hint of winter and the amber cast of the shrinking days gave me the [reason . . . to knock back] Beam or Black Jack straight-up in sawdust bars where I didn't have to make comparisons, with the long-necked Jax or Regal on the side that would take away the aftertaste and fill my mouth with golden needles. Each time I tilted the shotglass to my lips I saw in my mind's eye a simian figure feeding a fire inside a primeval cave and I felt no regret that I shared his enterprise. (*Last Car* 2)

The feral beast, whether stalking tiger or simian shadow, lurks within him, a maleficent and insidious succubus that seems at times to define his being down to his very soul. He admits, “I was not simply a drunk; I was drawn to a violent and aberrant world the way a vampire bat seeks a black recess within the earth” (*Heaven’s Prisoners* 74). And later, he acknowledges that

Annie was dead because I couldn’t leave things alone. I had quit the New Orleans police department, the bourbon-scented knight-errant who said he couldn’t abide any longer the political hypocrisy and the addictive, brutal ugliness of metropolitan law enforcement, but the truth was that I enjoyed it, that I got high on my knowledge of man’s iniquity, that I disdained the boredom and predictability of the normal world as much as my strange alcoholic metabolism loved the adrenaline rush of danger and my feeling of power over an evil world that in many ways was mirrored in microcosm in my own soul. (158)

That microcosm is revealed in his propensity for confrontive, aggressive, even violent behavior in that world to which he is drawn. Occasionally, he unleashes the beast in savage and even inhuman behavior, losing control almost completely.

The level of violence of which he is capable requires a lengthy quotation to demonstrate. In a confrontation with a truly evil but pathetically inadequate man, Dave can’t resist the primitive urges that dwell deep within his heart. Even as he recognizes that he is being provoked and taunted—unmercifully, to be sure—he cannot resist the temptation: “*Don’t take the bait*, I told myself. But there are

instances when that old-time rock ‘n’ roll is the only music on the jukebox.” The insults continue on both sides until Val Chalons (the other guy) can’t restrain himself and throws his drink into Dave’s face; nor can Dave restrain himself:

I hit him high up on the cheekbone, so hard that his opposite eye bulged from the socket. [. . .] I slipped his next punch, felt another glance off my head, then got under his reach and hooked him just below the heart. He wasn’t ready for it and I saw his mouth drop open and heard a sound like a dying animal’s come from deep inside his chest. [. . .] I knew it was time to back away, in the same way that a fighter in the ring knows when he has taken his opponent’s heart.

[. . .]

I started to step back, but Val Chalons tried to clench me, his mouth draining blood and spittle on my cheek and neck [. . .] He forced us both against a table, his mouth as close to my ear as a lover’s. ‘My father screwed your wife, Robicheaux,’ he said.

In my naïveté, I had believed the succubus that had governed my life for decades had been exorcised by the coming of old age. But it was still there, like a feral presence hiding in the subconscious, red-black in color, shiny with glandular fluids, waiting for the right moment to have its way. Some call it a chemical assault upon the brain. I can’t say what it is. But the consequence to me was always the same: I committed acts as though I were watching them on film

rather than participating in them. When it was over, I was not only filled with disgust and shame and self-loathing but genuinely frightened by the gargoyle that held sway over my soul.

In this case, that meant I genuinely invested myself in the deconstruction of Val Chalons. I buried my fist up to my wrist in his stomach and drove his head into the wall, clubbed him to the floor, and stomped his face when he was down. (*Crusader's Cross* 241-42)

The battering ends only with his friend and former partner pulling him off. He was clearly about to kill the man. Later, when he sees Chalons and the damage he has done to his face, the rational man emerges: "I actually felt sorry for him and wondered again at the level of violence that still lived inside me" (280).

Ironically perhaps, he remains always the lawman committed to justice, even if it borders on "frontier justice." Having been virtually forced off the New Orleans Police Department for his drinking and violent behavior, frequently skirting the border but never crossing into the openly illegal, he retires to New Iberia, his family home, and opens a bait shop on the bayou. (Is it a coincidence that this hothead is from the city where Tobasco is made?) He cannot stay away from police work, however, and he joins the local constabulary as a detective, a position that he retains through the rest of the series and that provides the basis for the hard-boiled detective stories that these novels are.

Dave is constantly tested, as Charles Rzepka would maintain that he should be, but he always passes the tests, ultimately maintaining his integrity, no matter how

bad a grade he would give himself. Those close to him see him for what he is: his three wives; Clete Purcel, his former partner and closest friend; Helen Soileau, his long-suffering boss; and Batiste, the loyal black man who works for him at the bait shop. Tolerantly and patiently, they see through his self-doubts and self-deprecation and accept, resignedly, his self-destructive aggression, recognizing his true essence and his loving, unselfish, and noble heart. It is no accident that Clete frequently greets him with the question, “What’s the haps, Noble Mon?” Molly, his third wife, an ex-Catholic nun, says it best: “You’re a good man. Everyone seems to know that except you” (*Crusader’s Cross* 135). He is left to struggle with the conclusion that “I was one of those people who would never know with any certainty who they were, that my thoughts about myself would always be question marks; my only identity would remain the reflection that I saw in the eyes of others” (*Flamingos* 56). Fortunately, that reflection is one of ultimate goodness and integrity.

* * * * *

Frederick Busch’s Jack

Girls. The single-word title jumped out at me from the shelf as I browsed a used bookstore. *Girls*. What might that be about? This was the literary section, so it wasn’t some prurient piece of pornography. Still, *girls*. With their potential to promise so much. It could be so many things. I had to know, so I pulled it down and began to read:

We started clearing the fields with shovels and buckets and of course our cupped, gloved hands. The idea was to not break any frozen parts of her away. Then when we had a broad hole in the top of the snow that covered the field and we were a foot or two of snow above where she might have been set down to wait for spring, we started using poles. (3)

Ah. A mystery or thriller. Perhaps a serial killer. That was when I could still stomach reading about serial killers. I continued reading that opening paragraph: “Some of us used rake handles and the long haft of shovels. One used a five-foot iron pry bar. He was a big man, and the bar weighed twenty-five pounds anyway, but he used it gently, I remember, like a doctor with his hands in someone’s wound” (3). That last sentence alone told me this was no potboiler of a thriller, that, whoever this Frederick Busch was, he might be a writer of some measure and that both he and his narrator were men of some sensitivity.

After two opening paragraphs about searching for the missing girl, the first page from the past goes careering off into the present:

The dog and I live where it doesn’t snow. I can’t look at snow and stay calm. Sometimes it gets so warm, I wear navy blue uniform shorts with a reinforced pocket down the left hip for the radio. I patrol on foot and sometimes on a white motor scooter, and it’s hard for me to believe, a cop on a scooter in shorts. But someone who enforces the law, someone’s laws, falls down like that. Whether it’s because he

drinks or takes money or swallows amphetamines or has to be powerful, or he's one of those people who is always scared, or because he's me, that's how he goes—state or federal agency or a big-city police force, down to working large towns or the dead little cities underneath the Great Lakes, say, then down to smaller towns, then maybe a campus, maybe a mall, or a hotel that used to be fine. (3-4)

Here is someone who knows about defective detectives, whether the defect is from something they put into themselves or from something that is already a part of them. And he knows about the downward vortex that the defect provokes.

As it turns out, the present of this novel is part of a framing vehicle that girdles the actual story, in which Jack, the narrator, is a competent campus cop at a small, elite college in rural, mid-state New York (a campus not unlike that of Colgate University, where Busch taught writing and literature to support his considerable writing career). Jack never makes clear what point on the downward ladder this job represents; all we learn about his background is that he was an MP in the Army, where he rose to the rank of sergeant and turned down a battlefield commission in Vietnam. It was there, in the course of mostly protecting civilians from his own soldiers in a fruitless and confusing war and as often protecting those soldiers from themselves, that he learned something about the actual work of investigation and interrogation. We sense that his job in campus security is less than what he is capable of, but we never know for certain what came between his war experience and this post. We do know, from these opening paragraphs on, that he is a badly damaged

individual who has spiraled downward from that position to the job in shorts on a scooter patrolling a mall or a hotel somewhere in the Southwest, as far as he could get from the cold in New England, actual and figurative.

This is a brilliantly structured and beautifully written novel, in which two mysteries are exquisitely interwoven, as Jack reveals a bit at a time about the missing girl, about his work, about his wife and family, and about himself.

I am talking here about being lost or found. You can be a small child and get lost, and maybe I will find you. God knows, I'll try. Or you can be a large and ordinary man and get lost in everything usual about your life. Maybe you will try to find yourself, and so might someone else. It ends up being about the ordinary days you are hidden inside of, whether or not you want to hide. (4-5)

Notice that the "I" and the "you" become unified as the quotation develops: I will try to find you (if you are a small child), Jack will find her; then you/I will try to find yourself/me, "a large and ordinary man" who has become "lost in everything usual about [his] life." This fusing of narrator and character and of reader and character and narrator is indicative of the way Busch blends the elements of the stories being told. It could become confusing, but it never is. His transitions, though they may be abrupt, are never puzzling, never feel arbitrary or discomfiting. The breaks are sometimes marked, but often they occur in Jack's narration as shifts in thought, very much like the kind of transitions that we experience in our own thinking all the time. Perhaps that is why they are so easy to follow.

For example, Jack is in the church of the missing girl's parents. (Mr. Tanner, her father, is a minister; her name is Janice.) He thinks: "I tried to hear [imagine] Mrs. Tanner praying. I tried to hear Janice. I had never heard her voice. I didn't think I ever would" (177). He tries to pray as the next paragraph begins, but his mind slips off into remembering Vietnam:

Dear God, I thought, keeping my eyes closed. I thought of men I'd known in the service who prayed. They had prayed at bad times, I thought, and maybe to someone religious their prayer would seem selfish, tainted by all their need. A lot of American servicemen beat up whores. They were exhausted, frightened men, and their experience was mostly of loss. They lost girlfriends and wives at home. They lost money over there, and they lost face. They lost some battles, though they won some. [. . .] So they *felt* like losers.

Oh, Jack, exhausted man, whose experience is so filled with loss, who loses girls and is losing a wife, who *feels* like a loser! His life echoes in his memory of the boys he couldn't save. And now he's trying to save girls.

In another example, a bogus bomb threat has emptied a classroom building; and in his role as campus cop, he is thinking of a pending Vice Presidential appearance at the school:

[We] would help to spy on the faculty and report curious characters and foreigners. Some feelings would be hurt; some people on certain lists might be asked to get off campus by the Secret Service for the

sake of the Vice President's safety. But no one would be violent.

Except in Janice Tanner's life.

Classes were canceled and students were sent on their way.

(73-74)

College life goes on, but Jack tosses in that one short-sentence paragraph like a grenade and reminds us of the disparity between the ordinariness of most people's lives and the acute suffering of others, suffering that haunts him constantly, the suffering of others as well as his own suffering.

The two searches comprise the two central threads of the story. The search for the missing girl is one mystery to be solved; it is what would conform to the idea of this being a detective story. Even more interesting, however, is the question of why Jack and Fanny have been so damaged by the death of their baby daughter. So damaged that they have had sexual relations only once in the past twelve months; so damaged that they cannot decide what to do with the baby's room upstairs; so damaged that every attempt to talk about "it" (the baby's death) and about themselves ends in an argument; so damaged that they have arranged their work schedules so that they pass twice a day: coming from and going to work, he to the school, she to the local hospital where she is the ER charge nurse on the midnight shift. It is ironic that she is the strong, capable nurse who sees her job as caring for him, while, in fact, and as we learn ever so slowly, he is protecting her.

What I find so dazzling about this novel is how, as Jack presents the search for the missing girl in a fairly straightforward sequential way, he reveals a bit at a time

about Fanny and himself, in no obvious order, moving from the present to virtually anywhere in the past and back again, just as the opening chapter moves from the search in the snow-covered field to the Southwest to Vietnam and back to the Southwest again. And in the midst of that chapter, telling us what the novel ultimately is about: “Thinking about the way we came apart, all of us, Fanny and Rosalie and Archie and me and the Tanners and their daughter and every man and woman who worked in the field between the houses and river, was like watching something explode, but slowed down” (6). What an apt metaphor: the novel as a picture of an explosion in slow motion!

Busch even warns us at the beginning of the second chapter that a simple sequential narration won't do and that this is no fairy tale: “You can't say once upon a time to tell the story of how we got to where we are. You have to say winter. Once, in winter, you say, because winter was our only season, and it felt like we would live winter all our lives” (12). Winter and snow pervade the setting and the story just as ice and cold invade the girl's body, her parents' hopes, and Jack and Fanny's marriage.

Before he becomes involved with the search for the missing girl, Jack first shows us why the novel is entitled *Girls*. The first girl is one he finds standing outside her dorm in the cold of winter wearing a bathrobe, sockless in rubber-bottomed boots, and crying about having been jilted by a boyfriend. He takes her to the house of the dean of students to be warmed and consoled and returned to her life as a college student. She tries to appear jaded and worldly with Jack, but he knows

that she is, in fact, still a child, a child with parents of her own. “Back in my rocker, waking up at whatever time in the morning in my silent house, I thought of her as someone’s child. Which made me think of ours, of course” (15). The first mention of his child but with no information about her, not even specifying gender, though we have to suspect it of being a girl since the child he has just rescued is a girl. And there is the title of the book, of course. He hints, we suspect. That is how he parcels out the information about his baby and what happened to her and to them, to him and Fanny. That is the way a detective proceeds: a clue, an inference, a suspicion. Then another and another until the mystery is revealed. And that is the way the novel progresses.

The second girl—actually it’s the first girl, second episode—but this time she is serious about the cold. She has again gone out into the snowcold, but now she has taken pills and gone far from the dorm, up to the quarry outside the campus; she wants to die. Jack reaches her in time and hurries her to the hospital, at one point saying to her, “whose head was slumped and whose face looked too blue all through its whiteness, ‘You know, I had a baby once. My wife, Fanny. She and I had a little girl one time’” (24). Now, we know for sure it was a girl, and he speaks of her in the past tense. Another hint, and we suspect that she is no longer alive.

They reach the hospital, and he is shaking so badly (from the cold?) that he cannot hold a proffered cup of coffee, muttering questions about how she is doing, whether she will be all right, finally saying, “She better not die this time” (25). This time? What other time? And who died the other time: this she or another she? It

must have been their baby; she is the one who died the other time. Again, the melding of two personae into one.

Soon thereafter, Jack sees the first poster of the missing girl, whose family lives in a nearby town. Then he receives an entreaty from a faculty member, who knows something of his background, to help the family in their search for the girl. He resists but finally accepts, wondering why he would allow himself to become involved, then realizing: “That was a large part of my problem. I had no talent except for finding work I couldn’t do” (*North* 235).

He eventually figures out who took and killed the girl, but he never does actually find her. The search party from the first page probes that field where the killer said he put her, but they never uncover the body. And we never find out exactly what happened to Jack and Fanny’s baby. We do eventually discover enough to understand what makes Jack so impossible for Fanny to live with, so impossible for himself to live with, as they grind “each other away with a kind of friction that didn’t involve our touching each other” (*Girls* 78).

Even when they try to talk, often with encouragement from a psychologist on the faculty who gives him informal counseling, Jack can’t bring himself to talk completely about that night when the baby died. Fanny thinks that he cannot talk because of the guilt he harbors; and try as she might to nurse and mother him, she ultimately has to leave. First, the house, then the area, and finally the marriage. She cannot live with the man who she thinks somehow, in some freak accident, killed their child and now cannot talk about it. As she prepares to depart, Jack asks, “Do

you think it's my fault she's dead?' She closed her eyes. The tears ran under her lids. Her voice sounded like she was trying not to cough. 'I don't want to know. I don't want to remember'" (253). What she remembers, as she tells Jack in an earlier encounter, is "You. You holding the baby against your chest" (210). He continues to probe, but "I was afraid to go after more. I wanted to be sure she didn't know." He asks again, "And I'm holding her against my chest." She replies, "Too hard, Jack. [. . .] Too hard. Poor Jack," she said. "Poor Jack."

Earlier, in the most fascinating montage of the novel, Jack is in a meeting in the library with the college staff and the Secret Service regarding the approaching visit of the Vice President, but his attention wanders off into memories of the baby being born, of his and Fanny's both being distraught by the baby's trouble sleeping and being comforted, and finally of what happened, at least part of what happened. At one point, the transition takes place mid-sentence:

The mixture of light and dark [in their house in the past] was the same as it is now, when the dean of faculty was telling the Secret Service about the dilemma and the Secret Service was telling the head librarian that canceling the visit was not going to keep her from doing federal time and Professor Piri asked if there was anything I could suggest *as our child went upstairs*. (115)

My italics indicate the transition. Jack realizes his lapse, begs the group's pardon and asks what was asked. Piri asks again whether he can suggest a way out. "There isn't one,' I told them." There is no way out. There is no way out, not out of the

college's dilemma regarding the Vice Presidential visit nor out of his and Fanny's dilemma.

As he sits in the meeting, his consciousness moves from that room to the memory of his house and the night when Hannah died. As the Dean of the Library drones on, he recalls having handed the baby to Fanny and her going upstairs to try once again to comfort the baby and get her to sleep. In the meantime, he has fallen asleep downstairs and in the twilight of sleep hears Fanny "snarling without words while the baby cried the same weak, tired cycle of noises over and over, Fanny crying back in what I guess you'd call frustration and the kind of rage it creates." He forces himself awake and runs up the stairs, hearing their enraged voices, like "dogs snarling."

I went around the corner of the hallway and then I was down the hallway in three long steps and I went from the hallway into the room, our baby's room.

I went into our dead baby's room.

Then we were on our feet in the library. People were discussing the irony of [the situation].

After the people disperse from the meeting in the library, he drives by the cemetery at the top of the campus

filled with dead professors, toward the quarry where the redheaded girl had tried to kill herself. I wanted to be alone under the low, dirty clouds of the darkening day, and I was, when I turned the engine off

and put both hands at the top of the wheel and leaned my forehead onto them. I must be a very bad and selfish man, I thought. I must have loved Fanny more than our child, our baby girl we had named Hannah, who was dead and under the snow. (116)

Under the snow, we might recall, like the missing Janice Tanner, whom Jack first resists trying to find and then works so hard but ineffectually to find. No wonder he could not agree to look for her; no wonder he works so hard to find her. He knows what happened to her, but he cannot tell her parents; he has to hold out hope for them.

He also knows what happened to his baby girl, and the weight of that knowledge is crushing him and Fanny and them as a couple. That knowledge makes it impossible for them to talk and work through the pain of their loss, because neither can bear to force the other to admit what actually happened in that upstairs room. His psychologist friend continues to urge him to talk with Fanny, but Jack hasn't even told him what actually occurred. "That was what, for the sake of some kind of honesty, some kind of friendship, I would have to tell [him] one day. I wanted his help, but I could never—and I never would—do what he would advise" (107). He probes Fanny's memory; but she doesn't know, doesn't "want to remember," and he cannot tell her that the baby died from what her profession would call shaken-baby syndrome, that, in fact, she is the one who killed the baby. Jack comes up the stairs too late, taking the dead baby from Fanny's arms. To protect herself from overwhelming maternal guilt, her mind can only remember Jack holding the baby. Colluding in that concealment, Jack cannot tell her what she did, accepting that she

blames him for Hannah's death. Their deception is what kills the marriage and turns Jack into the (nearly) alcoholic derelict cop spiraling downward from one mediocre job to another, ever lower on the law-enforcement spectrum.

The novel ends, as it began, in New Mexico, with Jack thinking of all that had happened, remembering them searching the field for the missing girl:

I thought, We could dig here forever. Then I thought, No, only until full spring. All we had to do was wait. But we couldn't. We wanted our girl back.

Everyone wanted someone back. (277)

But he cannot have Hannah back; she died. He cannot have Fanny back; she has died inside. He cannot even have himself back; ensnared in a web of lost girls and impotent to save any of them, he cannot move forward with his life, only downward.

A beautiful and moving novel, *Girls* stands on its own as the depiction of a detective who is, for me, the most damaged of all, who moves me with a pathos beyond poignancy. But Jack's story does not end with *Girls*; Busch later writes *North*, a sequel, which, interestingly, continues to interweave the story of Jack and Fanny and Hannah with a search for another lost child, in what becomes an account of Jack's possible redemption as he attempts to recover himself while he searches for the child.

There are interesting parallels and divergences from *Girls*. This time the missing child is a boy instead of a girl; but whereas Jack could not locate her where she lay buried beneath the snow and not in the ground, this time he does find the boy

(but, as with Hannah, not in time) and uncovers him from a grave where he has been rudely dumped, having been brutally killed after he was no longer useful to a drug operation he had been involved with. Jack has returned to the North, in the same general area from which he fled in *Girls*. It is no longer winter, and there is no snow, the promising warmth of summer perhaps an indication of the thaw that has begun to take place within Jack's core.

The boy is the nephew of a lawyer, a woman, whom Jack delivers from a gigolo in the bar of the Southern resort where he works as hotel security. He is still ever ready to save a girl in need of help, and she recognizes it at once. "I know a rescuer when I see one. Do you ever do what private detectives do?" (20). He does, of course, and he eventually agrees to look for her missing nephew. He also falls for her: "Blink your eyes and tell me you're in trouble and I'll work up a crush on you, I thought" (238). But that proves to be part of his redemption. He is reluctant at first to commit himself even to the point of a one-night stand with this woman, and yet he cannot let go of her. She returns to the North, to New York City and her law practice; and when Jack has lost absolutely everything he has except his residual humanity and his old truck, he heads North to find her and start looking for the boy; but he remains at this point categorically and unequivocally alone.

I hadn't a home anymore and I needed to know that all the time. It was one of the premises I worked with. I had a truck with a radio that tuned in my engine and played a nasty, buzzing static more than the voices or music of any AM stations in the area. I had knees that

answered to wet weather with an aching grind. I hadn't a dog. I had no wife or child. I hadn't a home. It was like the weather. It was like having a bad temper about bullies and a stupid weakness for women in one or another kind of trouble. (202)

This is a necessary existential emptiness for him, an absolute nadir from which the only movement is upward and only through which can redemption be reached.

The most moving moment in the novel occurs when Jack has to put down the dog that has been his constant companion and soulmate—if that is a possible position for an animal to fulfill—from the time of Hannah's death. The dog has become infirm: he has trouble breathing and his hindquarters barely work and then only with effort and pain.

We went back to the truck. He usually put his forepaws onto the cab floor and I gave him a shove from behind so he could scramble in and then up onto the passenger seat. This time he stood on the sand and looked ahead. Then he looked at me. He didn't move and I knew it was because he couldn't. I picked him up and placed him inside. After I shut his door I went around and sat in the truck with the engine running. I looked at him. Then I couldn't. (28)

A few days later, Jack takes the dog to the beach, having cleaned and oiled his handgun and having taken down the shower curtain from the bathroom. Once in the truck,

[the dog] stared out front and seemed to watch with his usual intensity.

He was serious because we were in the truck and that meant we were on a mission. His excitement caused him to work very hard for breath. I talked to him. I talked about what a fine fellow he was and how necessary our trip was. He was patient but he ignored me because he knew that what I said was unimportant. This was an errand and errands meant you kept an eye on the world and went straight ahead. You were supposed to be silent. As usual he shamed me into shutting up. (29-30)

I cannot do justice to the pathos of the passage in which he kills the dog. Bush's account is so moving, so tender, so heartfelt, so unsentimental, so beautiful that it must be read, not reported. I can only say that Jack spends the rest of the morning digging his grave there in the sand near the beach. Then he returns to his room and prepares to leave for the North.

You will by now have wondered about Jack's last name. He and Fanny are never given a last name in either novel, just Jack and Fanny. The dog is also unnamed, literally. "He doesn't have one," Jack responds when the lawyer asks. America, the pop group, sings, "I've been through the desert on a horse with no name." Has Jack gone through the desert of a broken soul with a dog with no name? His journey has certainly been a "long night of the soul," and it has taken him from the North through the desert Southwest to the Deep South and finally northward again. Or is the anonymity of the dog and Jack and Fanny an indication of Jack's loss of identity from the tragic death of his daughter, the erosion of their marriage, and the

gradual disappearance of his wife?

As *Girls* closes, the people of the town—police and civilians alike—are searching the field for the missing girl's body, and Jack has seen Fanny standing with the girl's mother watching them probe the snow. When he looks up again, she is gone. One senses that with her hope has also gone, certainly for the girl's parents and probably for Jack as well. In *North*, Jack learns from mutual acquaintances that Fanny went even farther north and continued working for a while as an ER nurse. Then one day she took a bottle of bourbon and a vial of pills, drove out to a cold lake and, swallowing both, walked into the water and drowned. Jack can only surmise that she must have finally remembered.

Suicide was Fanny's only way out of the prison to which she would have condemned herself for having killed her own baby, but perhaps it was also a way to free Jack from the prison that he had built for himself by trying to protect her from that knowledge. Now it remains to be seen whether Jack can actually let himself out and live again. He found the lawyer's nephew, and she has offered him love. *North* ends with Jack leaving the area of New York where he had lost Hannah and Fanny and where he had been unable to find Janice Tanner. He heads farther North, to Maine, bearing with him the possibility that the lawyer will leave New York permanently to join him. That he can go even farther North suggests that the cold within him is abating, that warmth is building within so that he can face the cold without. That he can imagine offering himself to another person, another woman, another *girl*, suggests that he recognizes that he has a self to offer, that he is regaining

the self that he seemed to have lost.

Early in *North*, Jack reflects on the missing girl, Janice Tanner, on her family, and of course, on their effect on him:

I drank more coffee and wondered why I rarely thought of her father. He was a decent man and his heart was broken too. But it was the girl's mother who had moved me so much. A friend of mine in those days said he thought I was in love with her. You could get in trouble, loving someone. (*North* 58)

At that point, he cannot entertain the idea of ever loving anyone again. It has only gotten him into too much trouble, brought him too much pain. At the end of the novel, however, we can imagine that he might now say, "You could get in trouble, loving someone. But maybe it's worth the trouble."

* * * * *

Two alcoholics, two miscreants (one, an actual thief), four ex-police officers, and only one licensed private detective. Each defective in his own unique way, and all illustrating how the detective in fiction may carry wounds or weakness revealing an internal discord that symbolically represents disorder in the external world. Solving crime and restoring order in the outer world become a way of attempting to dispel the demons that torment, or at least inhabit, their inner selves.

Though these characters may work to restore external order, they do not primarily, as Charles Rzepka says, "seek [. . .] to redeem this fallen society but to

maintain [their] personal integrity in the face of repeated temptations and deceptions.” Even Bernie Rhodenbarr, least virtuous of the lot, is faced with enticements and temptation, in the face of which he retains his own kind of integrity. Jack’s struggle is the hardest, and he is, indeed, the most damaged of the bunch. All are, in their own ways, examples of the contemporary knight-errant contending with private dragons in the modern detective romance.

Epilogue

De gustibus non disputandum.
—Latin maxim

At a student sidewalk art show many years ago, I bought an oil painting that I liked. A friend who was with me, herself an art student, scoffed and tried to talk me out of the purchase, pointing out the painting's faults, which were primarily that it was easily done ("It took him maybe fifteen minutes with a palette knife!") and that such paintings showed no real artistic merit or creativity. Not being a student of art myself, how could I argue with her? I couldn't use the trite cliché, "I may not know art, but I know what I like"; but that was, in fact, exactly the situation I was in. I recognize the level of quality in the work, but I like it. I still have it today. It's not in a place of honor, but it is in a spot in my house where I see it frequently; and I still enjoy it. I like the color, the composition, and the general impression of the piece.

It would be easy to defend detective fiction with just such arguments, and I will not criticize anyone's choice in fiction, no matter how low-brow (nor high-brow, for that matter). Choice in one's reading pleasure is as individual as one's taste in art, automobiles, or toothpaste. What matters is whether you like it.

I have read for pleasure in various sub-genres of fiction, from science fiction to best sellers to thrillers to detectives. I still read in the hard-boiled detective area, but as my reading became more circumscribed, I wondered why and thought that I noticed certain features in the authors I preferred that might have something to do with artistic value. This essayistic venture revealed some merit in my casual observation, for I discovered that the authors I prefer have something in common with

the writers of generally recognized literary art: they care about words, and they care about character. The authors that I no longer read seem to care primarily about plot. Plot is important, as E. M. Forster has pointed out, to maintaining an audience's interest in continuing to attend to the story; but plot alone will no longer sustain my interest. Plot is, of course, at the heart of all mystery writing. We want to know "who done it." Or why. Or how. Or how they were found out. But those mystery writers that I have come to value most do more than just create complex stories; they populate them with interesting characters, and they write with attention to language. Elmore Leonard may be the axiomatic example, for he is a master plotter, often bringing several seemingly separate stories to a surprising and satisfying concluding juncture, but he peoples those intricate, sometimes labyrinthine plots with interesting, unusual, intriguing, and sometimes comic characters. And his ear for dialogue has become legendary.

In sum, it's the writing that matters most to me, whether it be the light and entertaining writing of Sue Grafton or Jerome Doolittle, the comic writing of Carl Hiaasen, the witty writing of Robert B. Parker, the informative and interesting writing of Tony Hillerman, or the powerful and moving writing of James Lee Burke or Frederick Busch. It's the writing.

It's always about the writing.

[Prefatory note: In some sense, the following is an amalgamation of a Works Consulted and Works Cited list. I have listed only the works actually cited in the case of detective writers who receive passing mention in these essays. Listing every detective novel I have read (or can recall), even of those authors mentioned, seems superfluous if not silly. For those writers who receive more considered attention, I have listed all the books in the appropriate series, including a few that I have not yet read, in case an interested reader would like to have the complete titles at hand. The inclusion of other works cited should be self-evident and -explanatory.]

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